

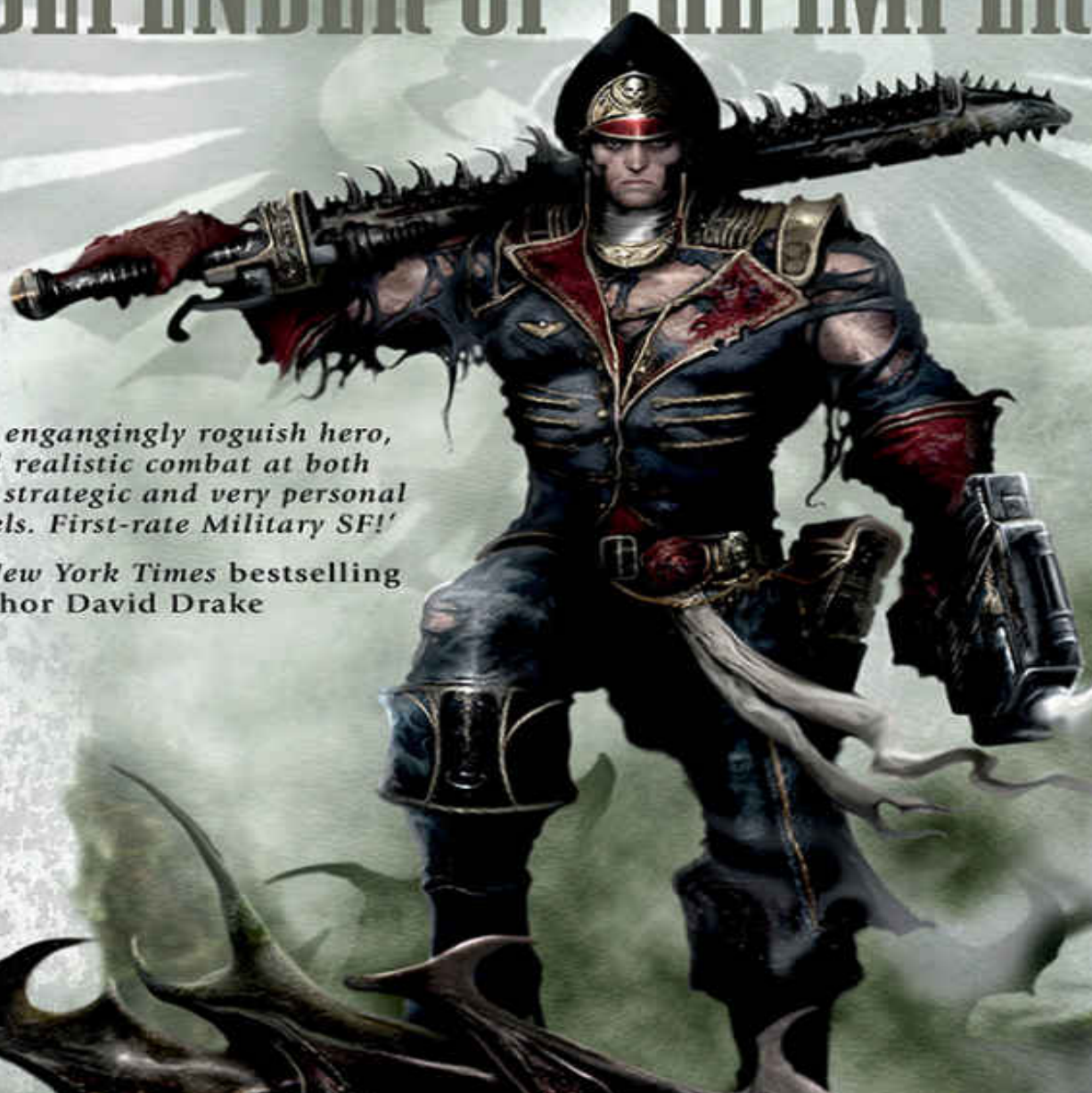
WARHAMMER
40,000

CIAPHAS CAIN

DEFENDER OF THE IMPERIUM

*'An engangingly roguish hero,
and realistic combat at both
the strategic and very personal
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A Black Library Publication

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CIAPHAS CAIN

DEFENDER OF THE IMPERIUM

Sandy Mitchell



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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the Master of Mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of His inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that He may never truly die.

Yet even in His deathless state, the Emperor continues His eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in His name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

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INTRODUCTION

It's hard to believe I've been writing the Cain books for eight years now, and I'm about to start plotting the eighth one in the series. I guess time really does fly when you're having fun. That's an average of a novel a year, not to mention the short stories that have accompanied them, two of which are also collected in this volume.

The first of these, *Sector Thirteen*, was originally written as a companion piece to *For the Emperor*, the very first of the novels in the sequence. Despite this, it was edged out of the first omnibus by lack of space: so here it is at last, just ahead of the fourth novel, which is the first in the overall timeline (confused yet? I promise this will all make sense eventually.) The other short piece, *Traitor's Gambit*, came out as a limited edition chapbook at Games Day 2009, and this is the first time it's been collected anywhere.

The three novels in this omnibus make up a very loose story arc, following Cain from almost the beginning of his career to its end, with an intermediate stopover in his time with the 597th, the regiment he serves with during the first three books in the series (Shortly after the events of *Caves of Ice*, and some years before *The Traitor's Hand*). This worked so well I'm trying it again with the next few, kicking off with *The Emperor's Finest*, which I've just finished, and which at last answers one of the most common questions I get asked at signings: how Cain ended up attached to a Space Marine Chapter, dodging genestealers aboard a space hulk.

Attentive readers, and there seem to be an awful lot of you out there, pick up on the references to untold stories Cain scatters throughout his memoirs, and often ask me when I'm going to write a particular one. The short

answer to this is that I don't really know; quite often these casual asides just pop up out of nowhere while Cain's describing something, and in most cases I'm as surprised as you are. Then, months or years later, while I'm plotting a new story, I suddenly know what he meant, and where it fits into the bigger picture.

The fact is, you see, that over the course of those eight years, I've got to know Cain so well that writing a story around him hardly feels like work any more (although, as any professional author will tell you, it takes a lot of hard graft to make a story seem effortless). In fact, I feel I've got so far into his head by now that I can more or less rely on him to dictate his own actions, once I've set up the initial situation.

Which is one of the most important principles of writing fiction: *story and character are the same thing*. Sorry about the sudden lurch into italics, but I can't emphasise that enough. Plot's just what happens. Story is who it happens to, why they care, and what they do about it.

In practical terms, that means I can let Cain do a lot of the work for me, which is something every author appreciates in their characters. I still need to come up with a plot for each book, of course, but it doesn't have to be nailed down too firmly – the initial idea can even be as nebulous as 'what would Cain do if he was surrounded by enemies, with nowhere to run?' Thinking about that immediately sets up a number of possibilities, which, with a bit of work, leads to a rough chain of cause and effect, stretching in two directions, forward from that point, as he tries to solve the problem, and ends up creating further difficulties which need to be overcome before eventually reaching his goal; and backwards, as I try to set up a sequence of events which would lead him to that point in the first place (The end result, in this case, was *Death or Glory*).

Once I've got a chain of events I'm happy with, and which seems consistent with Cain's outlook on life, I've got the skeleton of the story in place. Getting it down on paper, or at least on the computer, gives me enough of an outline to bounce off the editorial team at the Black Library for comments. Again, I can't emphasise enough how important it is for a writer to be able to get this kind of support. Not everyone's lucky enough to have professionals they can pass things to for feedback, of course, but it's vital to get another pair of eyes on your work. Only when someone else reads it do you realise that just because something was in your head, it doesn't mean it's made it onto the page!

When the outline seems solid, it's time to start the real work of telling the story. At which point Cain makes his presence felt again. To use an overworked analogy, the map is not the road, and the outline isn't a condensed version of the book. As individual scenes start to flesh out, and Cain interacts with the other characters, he invariably starts nudging the story in other directions. By now, though, we've been through so much together, that doesn't worry me any more. I know we'll eventually get to the conclusion the story must have in order to work. The path we take together might meander a bit, but there's nothing wrong with taking the scenic route.

I might almost go so far as to say that by this time Cain seems more of a collaborator than a character; but I won't, because he'd probably want a share of the royalties. We both hope you enjoy this book, though.

Sandy Mitchell,
January 2010.

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SECTOR 13

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Of all the worlds I've visited in my long and discreditable career, I suppose Keffia stands out as one of the most pleasant. In the abstract, at least; we were there to fight a war, don't forget, so there was plenty to keep the mind occupied, but in the main I look back on my years there through a faint haze of nostalgia.

Being an agri-world, the landscape was almost completely rural, so my overriding impression was one of endless plains of lush greenery cut across by isolated roads, which occasionally intersected at quaint rustic villages where nothing much seemed to have changed since the Emperor was in short trousers. The climate was pleasant too, the small ice caps trickling clear fresh water into all three continents from large polar mountain ranges, while the narrow equatorial band was mercifully free of any landmass worth fighting over. There were a few small island chains, where tiny inbred communities fished and grew tropical fruit, but they were too insignificant to have attracted any enemy attention and were ignored by our side too after the initial sweeps.

All in all I was pretty pleased with life. My inadvertent heroism on Desolatia a couple of years before had won me a little notoriety among the Imperial task force, and I'd been able to capitalise on that quite nicely. Even after all this time there were still sufficient senior officers and Administratum functionaries wanting to shake my hand to keep me comfortably occupied attending receptions and seminars far from the fighting, so that I frequently found myself away from my unit for days on end. A deprivation that Colonel Mostrue, our commanding officer, bore

with commendable fortitude, I have to say.

Even while I was at my post things were hardly onerous. The 12th Valhallan Field Artillery were parked well behind the lines, as you'd expect, so I'd had little occasion to face the enemy directly. Indeed, since we were engaged in a protracted campaign to cleanse the planet of a genestealer infestation, there was seldom anything to fire our guns at in any case. The war was a subtle one for the most part, of counter-insurgency and surgical strikes, with the enemy seldom massing in numbers sufficient to justify an artillery barrage. The occasional exceptions to this were renegade units of the local Planetary Defence Force, which would turn out to be riddled with 'stealer cultists with depressing regularity, and turn their guns on the Guard or the local units sent to deal with them until our overwhelming superiority in numbers and firepower had their inevitable effect.

Like most agriworlds, Keffia was sparsely populated by Imperial standards. This made our job of cleansing the place both easier and harder than it might have been. Easier, in that cities were few and far between (I think there were no more than a dozen on the entire globe), which meant that the dense concentrations of population a 'stealer cult needs to really take root and hide in were absent, but harder in that the cult had instead become attenuated, spreading its tentacles widely in small pockets of infestation rather than remaining sufficiently concentrated to root out and destroy in a single strike. The upshot of all this was that we'd been forced into a protracted campaign, cleansing the world province by province, one brood at a time, and we'd already seen three winters come and go since we'd arrived here.

Some, of course, found the slow pace of the campaign frustrating, not least my crony and closest friend in the battery, Lieutenant Divas, who, as always, was chafing at the bit, eager to get the matter over with and move on to the next war.

'We're making progress,' I told him, uncorking the bottle of well-matured amasec which had somehow found its way into my kitbag after the last round of hand-shaking and finger food I'd been dragged off to. 'Both the northern continents are completely clean already.'

'But they were only ever lightly infested to begin with,' he rejoined, finding a couple of teabowls in the clutter on my desk which Jurgen, my aide, had failed to tidy up before disappearing on some mysterious errand of his own. 'The majority of the 'stealers were always down south of here. You

know that.'

'Your point being?' I asked, pouring the amber liquid with care.

Divas shrugged, looking uncannily like a bored child getting tired of the current amusement.

'I don't know. We could be here for years yet, if something doesn't change.'

'I suppose we could,' I agreed, trying not to sound too pleased at the prospect. That would have suited me fine, my adventures with the tyranids on Desolatia striking me as more than enough excitement for one commissarial career. (Had I but known, of course, it had just been the prelude to a lifetime of narrow escapes from almost certain death. But back then I had yet to develop the innate paranoia which was to serve me so well in my subsequent century of running for cover and shooting back when I couldn't avoid it. The prolonged period of relative quiet had lulled me into a false sense of security, which a few years later would have elicited nothing more than a vague sense of waiting for the other boot to drop.) So, as I poured the drinks, I had little inkling of the fact that the turning point of the entire campaign was no more than a few hours away, and that once again I would find myself caught up in the middle of events over which I had not the slightest control.

The irony was that I'd had my chance to avoid it, but at the time I thought I was being remarkably prudent in not doing so. You see, Colonel Mostrue had never quite shaken the feeling that I'd been less than honest about my supposed heroism on Desolatia, when my attempt to save my own neck had inadvertently stumbled across a swarm of 'nids which would otherwise have annihilated us, and my subsequent panicked dash back to our own lines had drawn them neatly into the killing zone of our guns.

He'd never said anything directly about it, of course, but after that he made a point of creating subtle opportunities for me to prove my mettle, which generally amounted to nudging me in the general direction of trouble and looking out for any overt sign of reluctance to put myself in harm's way again. Luckily my side trips away from the battery had limited his opportunities for such amusements, but on a couple of occasions I'd been left with no alternative but to tag along with a forward observer unit with every outward show of enthusiasm so as not to undermine my fraudulent reputation.

As it turned out, these little expeditions hadn't been nearly as unpleasant

as I'd anticipated. On each occasion we'd taken some fire from the cultists as soon as they realised we were sitting out ahead of our own lines calling in their positions to the battery, but to my well-disguised relief the subsequent barrages had taken care of that before they got close or accurate enough to be a real nuisance. To all intents and purposes they'd remained a distant threat, despite the occasional las-bolt putting a dent in the sandbags protecting us. Indeed, in all of these minor engagements I had never even seen the enemy close enough to tell whether they were true hybrids or merely their human dupes.

All that was about to change, though, when the colonel stuck his head into my office the morning after my chat with Divas.

'Commissar,' he said, nailing me with those ice-blue eyes, which always seemed to see a lot further into me than I was comfortable with. 'Do you have a moment?'

'Of course,' I responded, with every sign of politeness, ignoring the faint throbbing of the amasec hangover I'd brought into the room with me that morning. 'Can I offer you some tea?'

'Thank you, no.' He moved aside hastily as Jurgen began to pour an extra bowl. I'd known he'd refuse, of course, which is why I'd offered. My aide was a splendid fellow in many respects, not the least of which was a singular lack of imagination that he compensated for with a deference to authority and a literal-minded approach to following orders which simplified my own life in many ways. But he was hardly the most prepossessing trooper in the Guard, and apart from his habitual untidiness, his spectacular body odour meant that visitors were loath to linger in his general vicinity, certainly not for as long as it would take to drink a bowl of tanna leaf tea. (One of the few Valhallan habits I've picked up from my prolonged association with the natives of that icebound world, by the way. It's made from a plant that grows in the caverns there, and it has a faintly bitter aftertaste I find most refreshing.)

'As you wish.' I sipped at the fragrant liquid, and raised an eyebrow in polite enquiry. 'How can I help you?'

'There's a briefing about the deployment of the garrison troops this afternoon at brigade headquarters,' Mostrue said, clearly fighting the impulse to back away from Jurgen.

Unlike the iceworlders I served with I had my office and quarters open to the sweet spring breezes, instead of air-conditioned to the temperature of a

meat locker, and he clearly found the relative warmth mildly uncomfortable, not least because it let my aide's distinctive bouquet flourish (another good reason for leaving the windows open, of course). 'I thought you might like to attend.'

And get palmed off on some risky reconnaissance mission to the battlefield as soon as we were there, no doubt. But I couldn't simply refuse; inviting me to observe the peacekeeping arrangements for the newly-cleansed continents on behalf of the Commissariat was a courtesy, at least on the surface, so I thought I'd better just accept, go along, and hope I could find some excuse to hang back when the danger presented itself.

I was just opening my mouth to agree, inwardly cursing the colonel, when Jurgen unexpectedly came to my rescue.

'Begging your pardon, sir, but if you're going to be leaving the battery you'd better reply to the Custodes first.'

'The Custodes?' Mostrue's eyebrow rose, in slightly exaggerated surprise. 'Have you been up to something I should be concerned about?'

Quite a bit, as it happened, but I wasn't about to tell him that. Instead I picked up the data-slate with the flashing red 'Urgent' icon Jurgen had placed on my desk, and which I hadn't been able to face looking at through the hangover until the tanna tea kicked in, and glanced at it briefly.

'Not this time.' I smiled too, so we could both pretend it was a joke, and nodded to Jurgen. 'Thank you for reminding me.' I turned back to the colonel. 'A few of our gunners are in civilian custody. It seems they got a little over-exuberant in one of the local hostelrys last night.' I sighed, with carefully feigned regret. 'So pleasant as this little trip of yours sounds, I suppose I'll have to stay here and sort things out.'

'Of course.' He nodded soberly, always a sucker for the 'duty first' routine, and for once I didn't have to stretch it. Discipline in the battery was definitely my responsibility, so I had the perfect excuse for sidestepping whatever little inconvenience he'd been planning to drop on me.

Of course, if I'd known what sorting out that apparently trivial little piece of paperwork would lead to I'd have gone with him like a shot and taken my chances; but then I'd never have cemented my reputation as a bona-fide hero, and the war for Keffia would have taken another turn entirely.

The nearest village to our artillery park, Pagus Parva, was about twenty minutes away, or ten the way Jurgen drove, so I had little time to enjoy the

fresh spring air as it wafted in across the kilometres of open fields that lined the road. I'd become quite familiar with the place in the past few months, so I was already well aware that it was somewhat larger than its name implied. It was the bureaucratic centre of the region, sector 13 on the maps of the continent we'd been supplied with by the local Administratum, so boasted a handful of civic buildings as solid and imposing as the temples and libraries of far larger settlements.

In peacetime it had been home to some two thousand souls rather than the handful of hundreds in the surrounding villages, most of them engaged in supporting the scattered farmsteads which clustered around it in some way, but the upheaval of the war and the arrival of so many Guardsmen in the area with pay packets in need of emptying had almost doubled the population. It goes without saying that most of the new arrivals were supporting the war effort by maintaining morale among the troopers in ways which didn't entirely meet the approval of the long-term residents. Or, for that matter, the local Custodes, which had tripled its manpower over the last few months. That had sounded pretty impressive until I'd realized all it meant was that the sector sergeant had been joined by a couple of resentful beatpounders from the provincial capital, who had clearly been selected on the basis of whoever the authorities there had felt the city was most able to manage perfectly well without.

The sergeant herself was another matter entirely, as I knew quite well, having taken care to establish good relations with the local Custodes as soon as we were deployed in the region, and to my pleasant surprise this had developed into rather more than a simple working relationship. Wynetha Phu was a solid career officer in her mid-thirties, about a decade older than I was at the time, with a full figure which looked quite good in uniform (and even better out of it, as I'd discovered on a couple of occasions). She was good at her job, knew most of the locals by sight if not by name and reputation, and had turned down the chance of promotion to more challenging duties in the city at least three times that I knew of because she enjoyed the sense of being part of a close-knit rural community. Despite our friendship, she eyed me coolly as I entered the Custodes post from which she exercised her stewardship of the scattered hamlets and villages of Sector 13.

'You took your time,' she said. I shrugged, smiling cordially for the benefit of her subordinates, who were slouching around the place trying to

look busy, and advanced through the colonnaded entrance hall of the sector house towards the high wooden counter, which barred the public from the working part of the building.

‘I know. My apologies.’ I adopted an expression of resigned good humour. ‘They keep us pretty busy in the Guard, you know.’

‘I can imagine, if the ones we’ve got downstairs are anything to go by.’ She prodded the rune, which retracted part of the counter, having recognized her thumbprint, and recoiled slightly as Jurgen followed me through the gap. The nearest constable’s jaw dropped visibly as the gap closed behind us with a faint squeak of un-oiled runners. ‘Who’s this?’

‘My aide, Gunner Jurgen.’ I performed the traditional back-and-forth hand gesture, which has accompanied informal introductions since time immemorial. ‘Jurgen, Sergeant Phu of the Custodes.’

‘Pleased to meet you, miss.’ He threw her a sloppy salute, which wasn’t strictly necessary, what with her being a Custodian and all, but to Jurgen a sergeant was a sergeant and that was that. Besides, she appreciated the courtesy, and reciprocated with a nod.

‘Likewise.’ The pleasantry was reflexive, but Jurgen smiled broadly anyway, curdling the expression of the constable even more, if that were possible. Wynetha appeared to notice him for the first time. ‘Larabi. Go and collect the commissar’s men, and sort out the charge sheets.’

‘Ma’am.’ He acknowledged her order with a manifest lack of enthusiasm that would have got any trooper in the Guard a stiff talking-to at the very least, and slouched off in the direction of the cells.

‘You’d better go with him,’ I told Jurgen. ‘Make sure they behave themselves.’

‘Sir.’ He trotted off behind the constable, who seemed to move a little faster as his new companion approached, leaving me alone with Wynetha. I’d been hoping for a little friendly conversation, even a mild flirtation or two, but her mind was entirely on business that morning, and I had to make do with a smile and the offer of a mug of recaf.

‘Let me guess,’ I said, as I scanned the dataslates and let them read my thumbprint to confirm that I’d taken charge of the recidivists in the name of the Commissariat. ‘Drunk and disorderly, lewd conduct, and a couple of brawls.’

Wynetha’s mouth quirked with what looked like genuine amusement.

‘You obviously know your men well,’ she said dryly. She sipped her mug

of recaf.

‘I know these ones a bit too well,’ I said, scanning the five names which, between them, made up a good 10% of my workload. That might not sound much to you, but in a battery of over three hundred Guardsmen it was a pretty impressive achievement in its own way. ‘Hochen, Nordstrom, Milsen, Jarvik,’ and I raised my head to stare disapprovingly at the leading trooper as the small knot of men emerged sheepishly from the cells, ‘and the inevitable Gunner Erhlsen.’ He grinned at me with the abashed expression I’d become all too familiar with over the last couple of years. ‘Tell me, Erhlsen, are you planning to make latrine orderly a full-time career?’ He shrugged.

‘We serve the Emperor as our talents direct,’ he quoted, eliciting a handful of sniggers from among his compatriots.

‘Where you’re concerned, he delegates to me,’ I riposted. The Custodians looked a little surprised at the informality of the exchange, but I felt no obligation to enlighten them. Erhlsen had saved my life back on Desolatia, picking off a tyrannid gargoyle, which was swooping on me from behind, and was under the fond illusion that I cut him a little more slack as a result. In actual fact he was completely mistaken about this, but I did nothing to disabuse him (or anyone else) of the notion, being keenly aware that if the rest of the troopers believed that looking out for the commissar’s welfare would rebound to their own advantage I stood a much better chance of enjoying a long and successful career.

I swept an evaluating eye over the little knot of troopers. ‘All right, Nordstrom. Who started it?’

Of all of them, Nordstrom was visibly by far the worst for wear. The others might have been hung over still, but were at least able to function. Jarvik and Hochen had to hold him up between them, and he seemed to focus on the sound of my voice with a visible effort.

‘I’m not sure, sir,’ he managed to slur after a moment. ‘Start what?’ Milsen and Erhlsen exchanged glances and sniggered. If anyone had more clearly been in a brawl I had yet to meet them. Nordstrom’s knuckles were bruised and bloodied, his face showing visible contusions, and as his torn, unfastened shirt swung open I caught sight of a dressing patch at the bottom of his ribcage.

‘Is that a knife wound?’ I asked, unable to keep a sudden flare of concern from my voice. If it was, the ensuing paperwork would take up the rest of

the day. But Wynetha shook her head.

‘No. It’s superficial. It was hardly even bleeding when we found him.’

‘And where was that?’ I asked. She shrugged.

‘An alley off Harvest Street.’ No surprise there; it was right in the middle of the area most of the newer residents plied their trade in, a couple of square blocks of taverns, gambling dens and bordellos which had sprung up like mushrooms in the shadow of the Agricultural Records Office to the great discomfiture of the Administratum adepts who worked there (at least, so they said).

‘It was those grox-fondlers in the Crescent Moon,’ Jarvik said. ‘I bet you.’ The others nodded, muttering dangerously. ‘They put something in your drink, and rob you blind when you keel over.’

It sounded like nothing more than barrack-room gossip to me, but Milsen was nodding eagerly in agreement.

‘It’s true. They did the same thing to me a couple of weeks back.’

I glanced at Wynetha, who shrugged.

‘Wouldn’t surprise me if he did get rolled,’ she said. ‘We’re always scraping drunken Guardsmen off the streets around there, and they’ve usually been picked clean by the time we get to them.’

‘I wasn’t drunk!’ Milsen asserted vehemently. ‘Well, not very. Not that much, anyway. I know how to hold my ale.’ That much, at least, I knew to be true. Most of the entries in the voluminous file I had on him were for minor infractions involving civic property and small items he’d ‘found lying around somewhere’ rather than excessive intoxication.

I returned my attention to Nordstrom.

‘Nordstrom,’ I said slowly, trying to get him to concentrate. ‘What’s the last thing you remember?’

His brow furrowed. ‘Got inna fight.’

That much was obvious, and judging by the condition he was in I’d be surprised if he remembered any of the details. But Wynetha pounced on the opening.

‘Who with?’ Once again Nordstrom’s face contorted with the effort of thinking.

‘Dunno,’ he said at last. ‘Did I win?’

‘How about before that?’ I suggested. This all seemed like a waste of time to me, but I supposed Wynetha had to at least make an effort to investigate what went on a few hundred metres from her sector house, and the longer I

lingered the more I could appreciate her company and the more time there was for Mostrue to leave for brigade headquarters without dragging me along to whatever little surprise he had planned.

‘There was a girl, wasn’t there?’ Milsen interrupted. ‘With purple hair?’ I glared at him to try and shut him up, but Nordstrom was nodding. The ghost of a smile appeared on his face.

‘Kamella.’ For a moment a similar dreamy expression descended on Milsen too. ‘Amazing tattoos.’

‘I knew it.’ Milsen looked triumphant. ‘The last thing I remember before coming round in the alley is buying her a drink.’

‘Ring any bells?’ I asked Wynetha, who was also nodding, but with purposeful recognition.

‘Sounds like one of the local joygirls. Works out of the Crescent Moon.’

‘There, that proves it,’ Jarvik said. He glanced meaningfully at his friends. ‘Someone should go round there and sort them out.’ It was pretty clear from the tone of his voice who he had in mind for the job. I had no objection to that in principle, having found other establishments more congenial for my own recreational purposes, but this was edging into the realm of things I didn’t want to know about because they’d make my job more complicated if I did, so I cut in quickly before they said anything which sounded like a positive plan of action. After all, if I didn’t know about any potential trouble I could hardly be expected to head it off, could I?

‘I think we can safely leave that in the hands of the Custodians,’ I said with all the authority I could muster. To his credit Jarvik took the hint and shut up, although I would have laid a small wager that the next time I came to town I’d find the Crescent Moon’s windows boarded up at the very least.

‘Worth shaking the tree, I suppose,’ Wynetha said, to my vague surprise. She looked at the constable she’d addressed before. ‘Larabi, keep an eye on things while I’m gone.’ She gestured to her other colleague, whose name I never caught, with a brusque jerk of her head. ‘You’re with me.’ After a pace or two she paused, and smiled at me. ‘Commissar? It was one of your men who made the complaint, after all.’

I was a little taken aback, I don’t mind admitting. And had I realized what I was letting myself in for I would have loaded my collection of defaulters aboard the truck outside and headed back to the battery as fast as I could, and taken my chances with Mostrue. But it seemed like a harmless enough way of wasting a couple of hours on a pleasant spring morning, and there

was always the possibility of a little time alone with Wynetha, so I found myself nodding in agreement.

‘Good idea, sergeant. It’ll save us having to bounce reports and datafiles off each other for the rest of the week.’ I glanced disapprovingly at the little group of disheveled gunners. ‘And give Nordstrom a chance to pull himself together before we leave.’ I could see from the covert glances that the troopers exchanged I’d done the right thing there, reinforcing my carefully constructed facade of being firm but fair.

Then I strolled out of the building to join Wynetha, savouring the sweet spring sunshine for the last time that day.

The Crescent Moon was a seedy-looking establishment at the best of times, which was after dark with the flare of pink and blue luminators flashing to lure the indiscriminating customer inside. In daylight it looked even worse, the peeling paint on the shutters and crumbling plascrete of the facade was a foretaste of the cheap wooden furnishings and even cheaper liquor on sale inside. There were some suspicious-looking stains on the pavement next to the waste bins that I took pains to give a wide berth to as Wynetha hammered on the door with the butt of her laspistol.

‘Custodians! Open up!’ she yelled, with surprising volume for a woman so small. After a few seconds of nothing happening she repeated the procedure, attracting the attention of a small gaggle of passing Administratum drones that glanced at us furtively and started muttering to each other that it was about time somebody did something about that dreadful place. The door remained resolutely shut.

‘Oh dear. There doesn’t seem to be anyone in,’ Wynetha said loudly, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. She turned to the constable, who had drawn his own sidearm with an anticipatory glint in his eye. ‘We’ll have to blow the hinges off.’

Someone had evidently been listening, because there was a sudden rattling of bolts and the door creaked open slightly to reveal an unhealthy-looking individual in badly-fitting clothes and a barman’s apron which might originally have been some kind of colour under its patchwork of stains.

‘Oh wait. My mistake.’

‘Yes?’ the man said, his hunched posture making his ingratiating tone sound even more insincere than it undoubtedly was. ‘How can I help you officers?’ His voice trailed off uncertainly as he caught sight of me for the

first time. Whatever he'd been expecting, an Imperial Guard commissar certainly wasn't it. 'And commissar...?'

'Ciaphas Cain,' I introduced myself, hoping that something of my reputation had preceded me; a pretty safe bet given the number of Guardsmen among the clientele. A slight widening of his eyes suggested that it had indeed done so, but before I could capitalize on it Wynetha took charge again.

'Kamella Dobrevelsky. We want a quiet word.' Wynetha pushed past him without ceremony. 'She works here, right?'

'Yes, she does.' The barman scuttled after us, agitation oozing from every pore. 'But the management is in no way responsible for any actions by members of staff which contravene—'

'Shut it.' The new voice confused me for a moment, until I realized the constable had spoken. Until then I'd vaguely assumed he was mute. 'Just tell us where she is.'

'Upstairs.' The barman's eyes were fixed on the laspistols in the hands of the two Custodians. I glanced around, finding nothing that looked like a threat. The establishment was as shabby as I'd anticipated, looking more like a downhive drinking den than something you'd expect to find on an agri-world, but I guess their customers weren't paying for sophisticated decor.

'Thank you. Your co-operation has been noted,' Wynetha said dryly.

We left the barman goggling after us, and headed for the door in the back of the room with a crudely lettered sign stapled to it saying 'Staff Only.' Behind it a corridor led to the back of the building, presumably to a storage area and, judging by the smell, either a kitchen or a waste dump (in a place like that it was hard to tell the difference), along with a rickety flight of stairs which ascended sharply to the left.

'This must be it,' I said. Wynetha agreed, and led the way up the stairs, which ran into a corridor running the length of the building lined with simple wooden doors. The three of us looked at each other and shrugged. 'One at a time?' I suggested.

'No need.' Wynetha jerked a thumb at the door to a nearby room a few metres along from us. It had a small ceramic plate adhering to it, with a picture of a fat pink pony in a ballet dress, and 'Kamella's Room' written underneath in wobbly letters that were presumably supposed to look like they'd been done in crayon. 'This must be it.' Before I could say anything

humorous about her powers of deduction she turned suddenly, and kicked the thin wooden panel from its hinges.

A feminine shriek of surprise and outrage confirmed that we'd found our quarry, and the constable and I followed the sergeant quickly through the wreckage of the door.

'Kamella Dobrevelsky?' she asked, although the question was only a formality. The girl sitting up in the rumpled bed matched Milsen's description perfectly, purple hair tumbling round a narrow face twisted with shock and anger. 'Get some clothes on. You're coming with us.'

'What for?' She began to comply with ill grace, revealing a body entwined with tattoos of a strange but compelling design, just as Nordstrom had said. Despite myself I couldn't resist studying them, taking in how they accentuated the curves of her body, and as I did so I felt the palms of my hands begin to tingle, always a reliable warning from my subconscious that something isn't quite right. She looked up and glared at me. 'Enjoying the view, Ciaphas?'

'I didn't know you'd met,' Wynetha said, switching her attention to me, her tone the temperature of a Valhallan midwinter morning.

'We haven't,' I said. The faint narrowing of the joygirl's eyes as I spoke was enough to tell me that she realized the slip of the tongue had just given her away, and now that the subconscious hint I'd noticed before was hammering against my forebrain it was obvious there was something not quite right about her musculature which the tattoos were designed to obscure. 'But I did tell the barman my name.' I began to draw my chainsword. 'And 'stealers communicate telepath—'

With an inhuman screech Kamella sprang from the bed, faster than I would have believed possible, barging into the constable who was still blocking the doorway. He tried to bring up his sidearm, but was too slow; Kamella's jaw elongated somehow, revealing a mouth full of razor-sharp fangs which clamped down on his throat, shearing through flesh and cartilage, and decorating the shabby room with a bright spray of crimson.

'Emperor on Earth!' Wynetha snapped off a shot, the las-bolt punching a hole through the shoddy partition wall next to its head as the shrieking hybrid turned from the spasming body of the constable back towards us. Beyond it I could hear feet in the corridor outside. Even though I couldn't see the owners, the sound had a peculiar scuttling quality which raised the hairs on the back of my neck. The chainsword cleared the scabbard and I

swung it desperately as Kamella leaped again. 'It's a whole nest of them!'

I parried a strike from a hand tipped with talon-like fingernails, feeling the blade bite through chitinous skin, and ducked as those murderous jaws snapped closed a hand span from my face. Wynetha fired again and for a moment I thought she'd missed, until I realized she was holding off the rest of the brood. Clearly I'd have to finish this on my own.

I swept the humming blade back in a counterstrike, taking the hybrid in the thorax, and severing the spinal column. Foul-smelling ichor gushed, reminding me uncomfortably for a moment of the gaunts I'd faced on Desolatia, and the thing that had called itself Kamella dropped at my feet.

'We're boxed in!' Wynetha yelled.

It certainly looked that way. The narrow cubicle was windowless, the only doorway crowded with horribly distorted parodies of humanity howling for our blood. She was placing her shots with care, picking off any foolish enough to show themselves directly with las-bolts to the head or chest, and pumping rounds through the thin wall from time to time to keep them from rushing the narrow space. I glanced around, a desperate plan beginning to form in my head.

'Keep them off as long as you can!' I yelled, swinging the humming blade at the thin wooden wall separating us from the adjoining cubicle. It bit hungrily, whining loudly as wood chips sprayed the room, and in seconds I'd carved a hole large enough to accommodate us. I jumped through, holding my humming weapon up ready to block an attack from the other side of the wall as I emerged, but the room beyond turned out to be unoccupied, and Golden Throne be praised, bright morning sunshine illuminated a shabby bedroom almost identical to the one we'd just left through a window so grubby it might almost have been opaque.

Nevertheless it was the work of a moment to smash the glass with the pommel of the chainsword and dive through, heedless of the drop beyond, while Wynetha sent a fusillade of parting shots through the gap behind us to delay our pursuers.

I hit the pavement hard, heedless of the jolt that drove the breath from my lungs, relaxing to absorb the impact with the instinct hammered into me by years on the assault courses of the Schola Progenium, and turned, drawing my own laspistol. A moment later Wynetha hit the ground beside me, and I peppered the window above us with vindictive enthusiasm, blowing the head of a thickset male from his shoulders. As he fell, I noticed a third arm

growing from his right shoulder, tipped with razor-sharp talons.

‘How many of these freaks are there?’ I asked rhetorically, as the barman who’d let us in emerged from the door and levelled a stubber at us. Wynetha took him down with a snapshot to the gut before he could fire, and we looked at one another with grim understanding sparking between us.

‘More than we can handle.’ More of the grotesques were emerging from the shadows of the alleyways, moving with a co-ordinated purpose that was all the more unnerving for taking place in complete silence. With a chill which raised the hairs on my neck I realised that there were normal-looking humans among them too, carriers of the genestealer taint, doomed to birth more of these monstrous hybrids and with their wills already warped by the telepathic influence of the brood.

I recognised one of the Administratum drones who’d passed us earlier, a piece of piping in his hands, advancing on us with murder in his eyes, a chilling contrast to the prissy bureaucrat of a few moments before.

‘Pull back,’ I suggested, suiting the action to the word and sprinting in the direction of the sector house, drawn to the promise of protection beneath the spreading wings of the aquila on the facade like a penitent to the confessional. (Not that I’ve been anywhere near one since the schola kicked me out, and I hardly ever told the truth in one while I was there, but you know what I mean.) Wynetha was with me, stride for stride, and our laspistols cracked in unison, striking down the cultists who were angling across the mouth of the street to cut us off. She activated her personal vox as we ran.

‘Larabi. Break out the weapons, we’re coming in hot.’ All I could hear of the reply was the faint echo of static that told me her earpiece was activated, but her expression was enough to keep me apprised of the other end of the conversation. ‘We’ve uncovered a stealer cult. Inform the divisional office and the local Guard units.’ Her voice caught for a moment. ‘No, he’s dead. Just me and the commissar.’

I missed the next exchange because I was busy ducking a frenzied rush from a hybrid wielding a length of chain. I blocked it with the chainsword, slicing it through, and riposted with a desperate swing that took his head off. Good thing too, it was remarkably ugly, with far too much tongue. When I regained my balance Wynetha was looking at me. ‘Are your men reliable?’

Well that was debatable really, but under the circumstances I’d expect

them to act like the soldiers they were, so I just nodded. Wynetha activated her vox again.

‘Arm the troopers.’ A pause. ‘I don’t care how hung over they are, even if all they can do is remember which way to point a gun they’re better than nothing.’

‘They’ll do a lot better than that,’ I said, stung at the implied slur on the men I served with. True, they were rear echelon warriors rather than frontline fighting troops – give them an Earthshaker or two and they’d flatten a city block neat as you please – but small-arms weren’t really their specialty. On the other hand they practised assiduously on the shooting range, Mostrue saw to that, as he did every other regulation, and Ehrlsen at least was a pretty fair marksman, as I could attest from the mere fact that I was still breathing. And don’t forget they’d fought off the ’nids on Desolatia, so even if they weren’t exactly battle-hardened veterans they’d already proved they could fight up close and personal if they needed to. So all in all I felt pretty confident in their abilities.

‘I hope so.’ Wynetha took down the last of the cultists between us and the sector house, and we started across the open square towards it. Our boot soles rang on the flagstones, echoes rising from the facades of the encircling Administratum blocks, and small chips of stone began to kick up around us, preceded by the distinctive crack of ionized air which accompanies a lasweapon discharge and the deeper bark of a stubber or two. Despite myself I turned to look behind us, loosing off a couple of shots myself in the vague hope of keeping our assailants’ heads down, then redoubled my efforts to reach the sector house.

My worst fears had been realized. The cultists had been joined by a handful of men in the uniform of the local PDF, who were armed with standard-issue lasguns, and several of the hybrids had produced personal firearms of one kind or another. There were more of them than I could have dreamed possible, dozens of twisted monstrosities crowding into the square from all directions, converging on us with a grim fixity of purpose that clenched my bowels.

‘PDF renegades,’ I gasped, feeling the air begin to rasp in my lungs. I couldn’t keep this pace up for much longer, but to falter meant being torn apart by the mob of inhuman hybrids behind us. They surged on like a malevolent tide, untiring and implacable, uncannily reminiscent of the tyranid swarms that had forged their foul purpose and sent them out to

infiltrate the Imperium.

‘This is just getting better and better.’ Wynetha smiled grimly, and dropped one of our leading pursuers. The others didn’t even falter, flowing around it like water round a rock. Another group was just clearing the corner of the sector house, angling in to cut us off from our refuge. A las-bolt, more accurate than the rest, caught the hem of my greatcoat, tugging at it like an importunate child.

‘Aim for the shooters,’ I counselled. If we couldn’t at least throw their aim off they’d have us cold in seconds. If they’d been proper Guard troopers we’d have been dead already, of course, and I found myself thanking the Emperor for the habitual sloppiness of the PDF which, like most professional soldiers, I usually found so irritating. (Especially while trying to co-ordinate with them on the battlefield. It went without saying that on the few occasions we’d been forced to co-operate with the local forces Colonel Mostrue had been only too pleased to delegate this onerous task to me, and I’d had no choice but to comply with as much good grace as I could muster. Of all the varied duties of a commissar, I’ve always found liaising with PDF trolls amongst the most irritating.)

We turned in unison, aiming as best we could, but under the circumstances I didn’t expect much. At the very best we were only delaying the inevitable until our pursuers closed, but I’ve always found that when you truly believe you only have seconds left to live each one becomes so precious you become determined to eke them out for as long as possible whatever the cost. We fired as one, expecting little effect, but to my astonishment the renegade troopers were falling, breaking, and running for cover.

‘Cowards!’ I bellowed, carried away with adrenaline and the reckless bravado of imminent death. ‘Stand and fight like men, damn you!’

‘Are you mad?’ Wynetha was staring at me in astonishment, and I whipped my chainsword up into a defensive posture, ready to take on the first wave of hybrids that was already leaping towards us, inhuman jaws agape. ‘Run, you idiot!’ Only then did I realize that several of our would-be assailants were falling, bloody craters exploding across their chests, and the distinctive crack of las-fire was coming from behind us now. Instinct took over once again, and I followed her advice, finding the square behind us littered with the corpses of the cultists who had tried to cut us off.

‘This way, commissar! Hurry!’ Jurgen’s familiar voice urged me on, and as I looked up at the sector house, now tantalisingly close, I caught sight of

him crouched behind one of the columns supporting the portico, a lasgun raised and spitting death at the horde of cultists behind us. A moment later I noticed another muzzle flash, and made out Erhlisen similarly positioned, picking off one target after another with smooth precision. He caught sight of me and grinned, no doubt enjoying himself hugely.

Larabi was by the doors, the blue of his Custodes uniform standing out starkly against the rich polished wood, blazing away on full auto without even the pretence of expertise, but the crush of distorted bodies was so great aiming wasn't strictly necessary; wherever he pointed his weapon hybrids and human cultists alike fell like wheat before harvesters.

With Jurgen's encouragement ringing in my ears, I put on a final spurt, vaguely surprised to find that a small part of my mind was still able to appreciate the rear view of Wynetha bounding up the steps a few metres ahead of me, and then almost before my senses could register it I was surrounded by the cool marble foyer of the sector house. I turned back to find Larabi closing the doors, while Jurgen and Erhlisen backed through them, still firing on the frenzied mob which was by now cresting the steps outside and bounding over their fallen comrades in a single-minded attempt to reach the narrowing gap.

They almost made it at that, the door stopped, centimetres from closing, blocked by a chitinous arm tipped by three scythe-like talons which gouged a deep groove from the thick hardwood as it flailed around for purchase. The two gunners leapt to assist the constable, putting their shoulders to the wood, but even with all three of them straining every muscle the sheer weight of the tide of bodies behind it began to force the doors open again. I slashed down with the humming chainsword, severing the obscene limb that dropped to the floor, thrashing and leaking foul-smelling ichor, and the door slammed to. Larabi triggered the locking mechanism, and thick steel bolts slammed home, securing it behind us.

'What the hell did you think you were playing at out there?' Wynetha was glaring at me, a complex mixture of emotions on her face. 'Were you trying to get yourself killed?'

There was no point in admitting I'd been so far gone I hadn't even noticed our comrades had opened up a corridor to safety for us, so I just shrugged.

'Well, you know,' I said. 'Ladies first.' The effect was quite gratifying, I have to say; she hugged me briefly, failing to find any words, and turned away, already assessing our situation like the professional she was. Erhlisen

and Larabi were looking at me with undisguised admiration, and I was suddenly sure (correctly, as it turned out) that suitably embroidered reports of my gallantry and heroism would be all over the sector before the week was over. I turned to Jurgen, who was taking in the scene outside with his usual phlegmatic manner. 'What's our situation?' I asked.

'Frakked,' Erhlsen muttered, before turning back to the nearest window and beginning to amuse himself by taking potshots at the abominations outside. Fortunately the Custodians tend to the sort of caution I was later to acquire, and the place was constructed to withstand a siege quite comfortably; the windows were narrowed, and placed to provide excellent firing positions.

'Pretty defensible,' Jurgen said, ignoring him. 'We could do with a couple of full squads to cover everything though. We're spread pretty thin.'

'Might as well wish for a Chapter of Astartes while you're at it,' I said, but as usual my aide was immune to sarcasm and he just nodded.

'That would be nice,' he agreed.

'Where are the others?' I asked. Jurgen gestured towards the rear of the building.

'Milsen's covering the back door. He found some grenades in the armoury and he's booby-trapping the entrance. Hochen's with him. Jarvik's up on the roof.'

'What about Nordstrom?' I asked. 'Still sleeping it off?'

'I don't know.' Jurgen looked confused for a moment. 'I thought he was with us.'

'A building this size, he could be anywhere,' I said. Before we could speculate further the sound of las-fire cut across the silence. Drawing the obvious conclusion I glanced across at Erhlsen, but he was in the middle of reloading, and looked as puzzled as the rest of us.

'That came from inside!' Wynetha led the rush back towards the rear of the building. The firing intensified for a moment, then ended with a gurgling scream that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Too impatient to wait for the counter to retract I vaulted over it, landing heavily, and found myself facing the door to the rear of the building through which Jurgen and Larabi had disappeared to fetch the others what seemed like a lifetime ago, but which my chronometer stubbornly insisted had been little more than an hour.

'Protect the brood!' Nordstrom appeared through the gap, a bloodstained

combat knife gripped in his hand, his eyes as vacant as those of the infected humans outside. The full significance of the apparently trivial wound on his chest suddenly became clear to me. I sidestepped his swing, blocking reflexively with the chainsword, and took his hand off at the wrist.

To my amazement he didn't even slow down, spinning to strike at my eyes with the extended fingers of his other hand. I ducked my head just in time, feeling the impact against my skull, barely cushioned by my cap, and heard his fingers break an instant before the crack of a laspistol next to my ear told me that Wynetha was still watching my back. As he fell, she ran past me, sprinting for the end of the corridor.

A las-bolt took her in the shoulder, spinning her back into my arms. I glanced at the wound, noting in passing that it was already cauterized so at least she wouldn't bleed to death, before handing her back to Larabi. Milsen was at the far end of the corridor, his lasgun aimed at us, a dozen or so frag grenades crudely wired to the thick wooden door behind him. A faint scrabbling sound betrayed the presence of our assailants beyond it, still determined to break through. Hochen's body was lying between us in a pool of blood, clearly beyond any medical aid.

'Cease fire, you idiot!' I yelled. 'It's us!'

'I know.' The emotionless timbre of his voice warned me what he was about to do even before my conscious mind registered the blankness of his stare.

'Back!' I yelled to the others, even as he detonated the explosives, blowing the thick wooden door to splinters and himself to perdition. A shrieking tide of malformed malevolence burst through the gap, jaws gaping, talons extended to rend and tear. A volley of las-fire from all of us blasted into the first rank, but those behind just kept coming, barely slowed by the obstruction of their fallen fellows. 'Fire and movement!'

It was a desperate gamble, but one we just made, taking it in turns to shoot down the front rank of hybrids while the rest of our party retreated to the stairwell leading to the roof. Even Wynetha managed to keep firing, her face pale with shock, as Larabi helped her up the staircase to safety. It was a close-run thing, mind, and we'd never have got away with it if the corridor hadn't been so narrow. Even now I break out in a cold sweat at the thought of how things would have gone if the monsters had been able to close a little faster, or our fire had been a little more attenuated.

'Up here, commissar!'

I grabbed the proffered hand gratefully, Erhlsen hauling me clear of the stairwell just as Jarvik lobbed a couple of grenades down among the seething mass of chitin, and Jurgen slammed the heavy steel fire door closed. The dull thud of the explosion shook the metal as I leaned against it and Larabi locked it closed. I gasped, the fresh air of the outside hitting my lungs like pure oxygen, leaving me momentarily giddy from the reaction.

‘They seem pretty steamed,’ Jarvik said, glancing over the side of the roof, and taking a random potshot into the crowd for luck. I followed his gaze, and the breath seemed to freeze in my throat. We were surrounded now by what seemed to be hundreds of the monstrosities, lapping around our flimsy refuge like the incoming tide round a sandcastle. In that moment I knew we were doomed, that all we could hope to do was stave off the inevitable.

‘Look, sir!’ Jurgen was pointing at something, a grin of imbecilic delight on his face, and for a moment I thought he’d gone mad under the strain. Then I saw it too, the unmistakable silhouette of an Imperial Chimera, and behind it another... ‘It’s the Cadians!’

Sure enough the column of armoured vehicles bore the crest of the Cadian 101st, an elite assault regiment that had just arrived in the sector from the victorious campaign in the north. Hard luck for them to be thrown straight back into the fighting, I thought at the time, but as it turned out it was just as well they were the closest Guard unit and the first to respond to the message Wynetha had ordered Larabi to send.

The unmistakable rattle of heavy bolters burst across the square like thunder, scything the milling abominations down where they stood. We joined in enthusiastically from our perch on the roof, pouring down fire from above, watching in undisguised relief as the tide of obscenity broke in disorder. The thudding and scrabbling against the metal door died away as the brood realized it was facing a far greater threat than us, and turned to meet it.

‘Well done, Cai.’ Divas looked at the gleaming new medal on my coat with barely suppressed envy. As usual, he was the only one present to use the familiar form of my given name, and from the corner of my eye I noticed Wynetha, her dress uniform augmented by a sling which made her look fascinatingly Amazonian, grin as she picked up on my thinly-disguised irritation. ‘Looks like you got all the fun again.’

‘It wasn’t the same without you,’ I assured him, straight-faced. I glanced

across at Erhlsen, who was looking surprisingly subdued considering he was supposed to be another of the guests of honour. 'I expected you to be a bit happier under the circumstances, Erhlsen. Free drink, all the food you can eat...'

'I know. It's these.' He fingered the freshly sewn bombardier's stripes on his sleeve moodily. 'They're kind of... inhibiting.'

'Don't worry,' I assured him. 'Knowing you, I doubt you'll keep them for long.'

'Well, there is that,' he said, looking markedly more cheerful, and wandering off to investigate the buffet.

'What the six of you did...' Divas persisted. 'If you hadn't found the cult they would have infected every Guard unit on the continent eventually. And we'd have lost the war. It doesn't bear thinking about.'

'Then don't,' I said. I was still getting reports in from the purges going on in practically every regiment on the planet, dozens of men executed for the taint they carried without even having been aware of the fact, and it left a sour taste in my mouth. I turned to Wynetha, desperate for a distraction. 'Care to dance?'

'To begin with,' she agreed.

DEATH OR GLORY

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Editorial Note:

With the exception of a few short fragments, all the extracts from the Cain Archive, which I have so far prepared for dissemination among the gratifyingly high number of my Inquisitorial colleagues who have expressed an interest in reading them, have come from a relatively short period of his long and eventful career: from the commencement of his attachment to the Valhallan 597th in 931 M41 to an incident in 937 M41, roughly a third of the way through his service with that regiment. Of the shorter extracts, three concern his first assignment, to the 12th Valhallan field artillery, and the remaining one his period of service as an independent commissar attached at brigade level in the year 928. Of Cain's subsequent activities as the Commissarial liaison officer to the Lord General's staff and a tutor of commissar cadets at the schola progenium following his official retirement, not to mention his intermittent involvement in inquisitorial affairs at my behest in the years following our first meeting on Gravalax, nothing has so far been said beyond occasional allusions in the disseminated portions of his memoirs.

It was with this consideration in mind that I decided, with the present volume to return the narrative to its beginning, so to speak. The circumstances of Cain's arrival among the 12th Field Artillery early in 919 M41 and his subsequent baptism of fire against the tyranid horde threatening the mining colony on Desolatia has already been covered in one of the shorter extracts, as has his participation in the subsequent campaign to cleanse Keffia of the infestation of genestealers preceding the splinter fleet concerned; anyone wishing to read a fuller, and somewhat less candid, account of these activities is referred to the early chapters of his published

memoirs, *To Serve the Emperor: A Commissar's Life*. In either event, there seems little point in repeating them here.

Though these incidents laid the foundation stones of the heroic reputation which, true to form, he continues to insist throughout the memoir that he doesn't really deserve, it was his activities during the first Siege of Perlia which truly consolidated it, and it is therefore that campaign which I have chosen to concentrate on in the latest extract.

Astute readers, with access to the right Inquisitorial records and the appropriate security clearances, will probably be able to deduce another reason for my interest in what to the rest of the galaxy seemed little more than the routine cleansing of an ork incursion from an isolated Imperial backwater. Cain's actions in this campaign were to have unforeseen repercussions both for him and for the Imperium at large. A dozen years later, in his first reluctant activities as a clandestine agent of the Inquisition, and almost seven decades after that, when the thirteenth Black Crusade cast its baleful shadow across the entire segmentum and he found himself having to defend Perlia for the second time. The latter incident still lay a year or more in his future at the point this memoir was written, however, so all references to the siege refer only to the first one, and any implications of hindsight are mine alone.

As usual, I have broken Cain's somewhat unstructured account into chapters for ease of reading, and interpolated material from other sources where I felt it necessary to place his typically self-centred narrative in a wider context. Apart from this, and the occasional footnote, I have left him to tell his own story in his habitually slapdash fashion.

Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos

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ONE

If I've learned one thing in the course of my long and discreditable career, apart from the fact that the more blatant the lie the more likely it is to be believed, it's that an enemy should never be underestimated. A mistake I made a few times in my younger days, I have to admit, but I was always a fast learner where keeping my skin in one piece was concerned; which accounts for the fact that, notwithstanding the odd augmetic or two, most of it's still where it belongs.

Of course back in the twenties¹ I was far more naïve, having managed to emerge from a couple of early scrapes with the beginnings of the reputation for heroism which has followed me around like Jurgen's body odour ever since, and a fine conceit of myself I had as a result you may be sure.

So picture me then in the relatively carefree days of my youth, cocky and overconfident, and still basking in the kudos of having single-handedly saved Keffia from the insidious genestealers who had almost succeeded in undermining our glorious crusade to eradicate them from that remarkably pleasant agri-world. (In actual fact, several Guardsmen and a couple of Arbites had accompanied me,² but the newsies hadn't let that inconvenient fact stand in the way of a good story.)

In the manner of all good things the war had finally come to an end, or to be more precise petered out to the point where the locals could clean up their own mess with the aid of a long overdue inquisitor³ and a couple of squads of Deathwatch Astartes, and the 12th Field Artillery were being pulled out for reassignment along with everyone else.

'So where the hell is Perlia anyway?' I asked, raising my voice above the growling of the Trojans hauling our limbered-up Earthshakers out onto the apron of the main cargo pad of Keffia's premier star port. By which I mean

that it had a proper rockcrete landing field, and some rudimentary repair and maintenance facilities for the shuttles that grounded there. Most of the others were little more than cleared fields, where the shuttles from the grain barges in orbit could simply load up and depart again without undue ceremony. No wonder the 'stealers had found the planet so easy to infiltrate.

Lieutenant Divas, the colonel's subaltern, and the closest thing I had to a friend in the battery, shrugged, his fringe falling into his eyes as usual.

'Somewhere to spinward I think.' If he was going to say anything else he was forced to give up at that point, as a heavy-lift cargo hauler screamed in overhead, its landing thrusters kicking in at the last possible moment, and dropped to the rockcrete with an impact that resonated right up my spine through the soles of my boots. Clearly the pilot wasn't about to take our victory for granted just yet, coming in as though the landing zone was still potentially hot; and given the number of cultists and hybrids still at large, I couldn't altogether blame him for that.⁴ I shrugged in return, as the howling of the engines died away to a level where my voice might just be audible.

'I'm sure the colonel will fill us in when he gets back,' I bellowed, and turned away, already dismissing the matter from my mind, content to let Divas deal with the tedious job of supervising the stowage of our precious artillery pieces on his own. He nodded, absurdly eager as always, positively looking forward to the next war.

'I hear they've got a bit of an ork problem,' he yelled back. Well that didn't sound so bad. Never having encountered the greenskins before I was sure they couldn't be nearly as intimidating as the genestealers or the tyranid horde I'd already faced and bested. After all, the popular image of them was of uncouth, slow-witted barbarians, which meant that, if anything, they were considered a bit of a joke, at least by those fortunate enough not to have actually faced them in the flesh, so I plastered a self-confident grin on my face and left him to it.

Wynetha⁵ had taken a few day's leave to see me off, and I could think of far better ways of spending my last evening on Keffia than watching sweaty gunners lug heavy objects about.

In the event, the night passed more than pleasantly, and I found myself stifling a yawn at several points in the briefing the following day. The windows of the conference room had been left wide open to admit a breeze, sharp with the chill of approaching autumn, and I found myself unusually

grateful for its assistance in keeping my eyes open. All the battery commanders⁶ were present, trying to look interested, while Colonel Mostrue, our commanding officer, regurgitated the information that had been passed on to him and the rest of the regimental commanders by the Lord General or someone equally exalted. In later years I was to be privy to the higher level briefings myself, of course, and find them a great deal more candid, not to mention worrying, but back then I still took a lot of what I was told at face value.

‘Are we boring you, commissar?’ Mostrue asked acidly, turning his ice-blue eyes in my direction. He’d never quite believed my hastily improvised explanation for being the inadvertent hero of Desolatia, when my perfectly natural attempt to make a run for it before the ’nids arrived had simply succeeded in luring an unsuspected flanking attack into the killing zone of our guns. Mostrue was too canny to let his doubts about my character show openly. Instead he tried to needle me at every opportunity, no doubt hoping I’d let something slip to confirm his suspicions. As usual I refused to respond, meeting the challenge head-on, as though I considered it nothing more than light-hearted banter.

‘Far from it,’ I assured him, allowing a visible yawn to get out in the process. ‘Bit of a late night, that’s all, lot of paperwork to get through before we pull out.’ Both of which were true statements, and if he chose to link them in his mind and draw the wrong conclusions that was hardly my fault. In fact, I had delegated most of the routine stuff to Jurgen, my malodorous and indefatigable aide, and was confident that he would deal with it in his usual meticulous fashion.

Despite his unprepossessing appearance, complete lack of social skills, and an all-pervading body odour that could fell a grox, Jurgen had turned out to be the ideal aide, at least in my case. For one thing, he was doggedly literal in following orders, unimaginative enough to simply accept whatever I told him without question, which meant that he had soon become an indispensable buffer between me and some of the more onerous aspects of my job. For another, he had turned out to have an almost preternatural talent for scrounging, which made my life a great deal more comfortable than it might otherwise have been (and probably his own as well, although I was careful not to enquire about that). At the time, neither of us was aware of his greatest asset, nor would be until our fateful encounter with Amberley on Gravalax a decade or so later,⁷ but I was to benefit from that as well on a

number of occasions without ever realising the fact.

‘Then I suppose we should be grateful that you could spare the time to join us at all,’ Mostrue replied, not sounding in the least bit grateful, despite his words.

‘You know me,’ I said, nodding as though the colonel had paid me a compliment, and pouring myself a fresh mug of recaf. ‘Duty first.’ Given the Valhallans’ love of low temperatures I’d taken to making sure there was a hot drink waiting for me whenever I had to sit through a meeting with the regiment’s senior command staff.

‘Quite,’ Mostrue said dryly, turning back to the portable hololith. A star map appeared, the Keffia system easily identifiable in one corner from the cluster of contact icons marking the positions of the Imperial armada assembling in orbit. There seemed to be rather more ships there than I remembered, and I remarked on the fact.

Mostrue nodded, thinly masking his displeasure at being interrupted. ‘That’s correct. Our transport vessels and their escorts have been joined by a battle group from the sector fleet.’ I sipped my recaf, which had suddenly become unpalatably bitter, a flutter of apprehension beginning to make itself felt in the pit of my stomach: that meant we would be on our way to a major war zone by the sound of things. I tried to quiet the nagging sense of foreboding. Even if that were the case, we would still be deployed well behind the front lines, far from the main bulk of the enemy forces. That was why I’d gone to so much trouble to secure a posting to an artillery unit in the first place, so that I could stay well away from the fighting, and by and large it had worked. The exceptions had been terrifying, of course, but I’d come out of those incidents hailed as a hero, and there was no reason to suspect that my luck wouldn’t continue to hold on Perlia, wherever that was. I tried to remain calm, and sound insouciant.

‘Sounds like a big operation then,’ I interjected, more for the pleasure of putting Mostrue off his stride again than anything else.

‘It is.’ The colonel nodded, as though the remark had made sense. ‘And it’s still only one flotilla among many. Reinforcements are being brought in from all over the sector.’

The palms of my hands began to itch in earnest. This was beginning to sound more serious by the moment. Mostrue did something to the hololith, centring an otherwise unremarkable system a couple of subsectors away. Noticing that it was indeed to spinward, Divas grinned at me, and I nodded

an acknowledgement. 'And this is where most of them are going. Perlia.'

'It doesn't look particularly remarkable,' I said.

Mostrue shook his head. 'That's because it isn't,' he replied dryly. 'Apart from the fact that it's been targeted by this.'

The picture in the hololith changed abruptly, eliciting a couple of startled intakes of breath from among the cluster of officers around it. A couple, older than the rest, flinched, reflexively reaching for their side arms before composing themselves.

'An ork,' I said. I'd seen holos of them before, and even a couple of preserved corpses at the schola progenium, but this one seemed particularly impressive. I assumed (wrongly as things were to turn out) that Mostrue was projecting it a little larger than life size for dramatic effect. It was as heavily muscled as most of its kind, more so if that were possible, and wore a ramshackle suit of armour apparently assembled from random pieces of scrap. It carried a crude form of bolter, large enough to be hefted by a member of the Astartes, in one vast misshapen hand as though it were no more than a pistol, and a huge axe in the other. Small red eyes glared hatred from under the thing's overhanging brow.

'Not just any ork,' Mostrue said. 'According to the lord general, this is their leader, Gargash Korbul. He's united the greenskins of several tribes, and declared *waaaagh*⁸ against the Imperial worlds right across the subsector.' He pronounced the ork word with noticeable distaste, and, as I was subsequently to discover, not nearly enough volume or saliva to get the true flavour of it. After giving us a moment longer to absorb the full ghastliness of the greenskin warlord, he switched the image back to the star map. 'So far they've struck here, here, and here.' Systems helpfully turned green with ork contact icons as he pointed. 'For the most part these incursions have been contained, however, at least for the time being. The critical system is this one, Perlia, where the bulk of the Imperial industrial capacity is. If they take that, they'll have all the resources they need to roll right across the subsector.'

'Then we'd better make sure they don't get it,' I said, summing up the mood of the meeting. Mostrue nodded.

'It sounds quite simple when you put it like that,' he said. His ice-blue eyes rested on mine for a moment, and I suppressed a shiver, which wasn't entirely due to the iceworlders' preference for wide-open windows. 'Let's just hope your confidence isn't misplaced.'

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Editorial Note:

Since, as usual, Cain doesn't bother to put anything he describes into a wider context, this seems as good a point as any to interpolate an overview of the situation he was to find himself so unexpectedly thrust into. The book it comes from covers the main points as well as most popular accounts of the First Siege: readers wanting more detail are referred to Broedenour's thirty-seven volume work Waaaagh! and Peace: The Siege of Perlia and its Neighbouring Systems. (Had the author of this magisterial work not been tragically killed by a toppling library stack before its completion it would undoubtedly be regarded as the definitive work on the subject. As it is, it remains an unsurpassed work of reference for anyone interested in the minutiae of the first nine weeks of the two-year campaign.)

From *Green Skins and Black Hearts: The Ork Invasion of Perlia* by Hismyonie Kallis, 927 M41

Though the greenskins had struck almost without warning, their crude starships erupting from the warp in four systems almost simultaneously, they were to face far stronger resistance than they expected. The gunboats of the local Space Defence Forces took a heavy toll in every case, weakening the attacks on Savia, Metrium and Sodallagain⁹ to the point where the local Planetary Defence Forces were able to keep the savage invaders who made it to the surface of these worlds effectively contained until Naval and Imperial Guard units arrived to turn the tide.

It was a different story on Perlia, however, where the vast majority of the ork forces were deployed. Despite the gallantry of the heroes manning

them, the system defences were overwhelmed in short order, allowing the brutish greenskins to establish several beachheads across the face of the planet. With Imperial Guard reinforcements still several months away, the high command of the PDF reluctantly abandoned the eastern continent entirely, withdrawing what forces they could save to bolster the defence of the more densely populated and industrialised western hemisphere. Despite their best efforts to evacuate the region, roughly twelve million civilians and an untold number of PDF stragglers were left to the mercy of the orks, who, typically for their degenerate kind, had none to offer.

Of the suffering and privations these martyrs were to endure, and the heroic acts of resistance many were to carry out over the long weeks that followed, much has been written since. Their stoicism was to be rewarded, however, as deliverance was nearer at hand than anyone could possibly have dared to hope in those dark and desperate times. For among the first of the Guard reinforcements to arrive was Ciaphas Cain, the man whose inspirational leadership was to turn the tide more than any other factor in the whole war...

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TWO

Well, the colonel spoke truer than he knew, of course, but having no inkling of that at the time, I dismissed it as just another fruitless attempt to get under my skin and forgot all about it, determined to make the best of our time aboard the *Hand of Vengeance* – a typically sturdy troopship which had already survived Emperor knew how many centuries of chugging back and forth through the warp, delivering supplies and cannon fodder to innumerable war zones. Though I'd never encountered a living greenskin by that point, I'd sat through enough lectures at the schola to believe I had a reasonably good idea of what they were like, and the 12th had been in action against them frequently enough for some of the older hands to have personal stories of their own. True to form, however, few of them felt like socialising with the regimental commissar, and the ones who did take the time to share their experiences struck me as exaggerating, no doubt with the intention of trying to disconcert me. That they were telling no more than the truth, or at least embroidering it no more than old soldiers usually do, I was to find out for myself soon enough.

'They can't be as tough as all that,' I said to Divas, on what was supposed to be our last evening in transit, over a hand of tarot in the stateroom which had been assigned to me. I didn't feel much like socialising by that point, as I'm sure you'll appreciate, but the familiar activity helped keep the thought of what we'd be facing in a few hours time at bay. 'You wiped the floor with them on Desolatia before I turned up.'¹⁰

'That's true.' He nodded, debating visibly with himself whether to draw another card, and deciding to stick. 'Of course the 12th never saw them close to, but they folded soon enough.'

'I'm sure you played your part,' I said, preparing to prove the old adage

about a fool and his money yet again. Standing a long way back from the battlefield, lobbing high explosive death at the enemy from a safe distance, still struck me as the ideal way of passing a war, and despite the fluttering of apprehension in the pit of my stomach the rational part of my mind had no doubt that this campaign would prove as uneventful as most of my service with the 12th Field Artillery had been. Divas nodded.

‘Of course we did,’ he said, ‘but I can’t help envying some of the line regiments. They really got stuck in against the greenies.’ They were chewed to bits by the tyranids shortly afterwards, of course, but that was beside the point. Divas was a Valhallan after all, which meant he relished the prospect of killing orks above pretty much anything else¹¹, so I nodded in understanding as I laid my cards on the table.

‘My hand, I think.’ I reached out to take the pot, comfortably beating his pair of ecclesiarchs.

‘Not so fast.’ The third player in our discreet little gathering smiled at me, perfect white teeth gleaming in a dark brown face framed by hair the colour of space, which rippled with highlights as she moved. ‘Three inquisitors and the Emperor.’ She scooped up the little heap of coins, grinning triumphantly, revealing an impressive amount of cleavage down the unbuttoned neck of her uniform shirt as she leaned across the table. Despite losing a fair amount of money, I smiled in return. I couldn’t help it, she was just that kind of a girl.

I’d met Karrie Straun on the first day of our voyage, when she’d been dispatched to make sure our vehicles and artillery pieces had been properly stowed in the hold, and it hadn’t taken us long to hit it off: she was gratifyingly impressed by the stories she’d heard about me, and I, as you might expect, was pleasantly surprised by the sight of a pretty face in these incongruous surroundings. One thing led to another, and despite the risk of discovery (which we were both young and foolish enough to find vaguely exciting) we had spent as much time alone together as we could contrive.¹² Had she not been due back on duty in less than an hour, I have no doubt we’d have found far more interesting ways of passing my last evening on board than fleecing Divas.

‘Never mind, Cai.’ She grinned, knowing how much the familiar form of my given name irked me. Divas used it all the time, of course, but he was an idiot with all the sensitivity of an ork, and had never noticed how much I disliked it. ‘Unlucky at cards...’ Before she could complete the quotation

she broke off, a faint expression of puzzlement crossing her perfectly formed features. 'That's odd.'

'What is?' I asked, the palms of my hands beginning to itch as they often did when something looked like going horribly wrong.

Karrie cocked her head as though listening to something. 'I don't know. The engines are fluctuating.'

I was prepared to take her word for it. She was a third generation crew member, who'd grown up in the corridors of the ship, and was no doubt as attuned to the subtle sounds and vibrations of that environment as I'd been to the depths of the underhive.¹³

Her expression grew grave. 'Better hang on to something.'

Almost before she'd finished speaking a new voice cut in, harsh and mechanical, echoing from the voxcasters placed throughout the ship.

'Prepare for transition to the materium. All crew to their posts. Emergency transition in—'

I never heard how soon the event was expected. Abruptly, something vast and malevolent seemed to sink its talons into the centre of my being, turning me inside out. I stumbled and fell, banging my shin painfully against the leg of the table. I staggered to my feet again, trying to ignore the nagging pain still flaring behind my temples.

'What the hell was that?' Divas asked, not unreasonably under the circumstances. Karrie shuddered, looking more disconcerted than I'd ever seen her in the few weeks we'd shared one another's company.

'The transition,' she said, clearly hanging on to her last meal with some difficulty. She pulled her jacket on. 'I've got to go.'

'I'm coming too,' I said, buckling the belt with my chainsword and laspistol round my waist, and looking for my uniform cap. 'If something's going on I should be with the regiment.' Before Mostrue had the chance to volunteer me for some mortally dangerous attempt to set things to rights.

'Me too,' Divas said, taking his lead from me as usual.

'That didn't feel like any transition I've ever been through before,' I said. 'What caused it?'

'I've no idea.' Karrie was beginning to recover now, and led the way out of my stateroom, glancing back over her shoulder to talk to us as she did so. 'The only time I ever felt anything like that...' She broke off, clearly unwilling to complete the thought.

'What?' Divas asked. Karrie shook her head.

‘The navigator died. The wards failed, and a daemon materialised on the control deck. But that couldn’t have happened; the alarms would have gone off.’

‘Commissar?’ There was no mistaking the owner of that voice, Jurgen’s distinctive odour preceding it as always. He emerged from the cabin next to mine, his habitual expression of vague bafflement obscurely reassuring. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘Very,’ I said. The corridor was beginning to fill with agitated officers from the other Guard regiments aboard. I caught a glimpse of a Catachan major, towering over the rest of us, forging through the press with the ease of a Space Marine surrounded by ordinary mortals, a pasty and worried looking commissar trailing at his heels.

Confused and angry voices echoed in the confined space. Getting through that lot was going to be a nightmare.

‘This way.’ Karrie led us through a maintenance hatch I’d barely noticed before, gaining access with a short catechism to a speaker grille beside it which seemed to recognise her voice.¹⁴ As it swung closed behind us, cutting off the tumult in the corridor, I found myself in a dimly lit passageway, considerably narrower than the one we’d just left, its walls lined with colour-coded pipes shrouded for the most part in dust.

‘Where are we?’ Divas asked.

‘Conduit twenty-three,’ Karrie told him, as though that meant anything to any of us, and led the way at a rapid trot which set up interesting oscillations in her uniform. ‘We’ll make better time in here.’ She was evidently looking for something, because after a couple of minutes she stopped abruptly and I collided with her, taken by surprise, but not so much so that I didn’t enjoy the experience.

‘What are we waiting for?’ Divas asked, looking almost as confused as Jurgen. By way of an answer, Karrie picked up the handset of a vox-line and punched out a code on its numeral pad.

‘I’m trying to find out what’s going on,’ Karrie said. As she spoke I felt a faint tremor through the deck plates under my feet, and if anything the expression of concern on her face intensified. ‘That doesn’t sound good.’

‘Commissar?’ Jurgen directed my attention to a small data lectern standing in a nearby niche, beneath an icon of the Omnissiah, no doubt for the use of any engineers carrying out routine maintenance on whatever vital systems were currently surrounding us. ‘Could you find out anything from that?’

‘Maybe,’ I said. I’m no tech-priest, of course, but like anyone else I’d been taught the basic rituals of data retrieval at the schola, so it seemed worth a try. While Karrie began a hushed and urgent conversation with whoever was on the other end of the vox-line, I muttered the catechism of activation and slapped the power rune. The hololith came to life, projecting a rotating image of the Adeptus Mechanicus cogwheel, and I entered my commissarial override code, hoping that it would prove as effective with naval equipment as it did with its Imperial Guard equivalent.

‘It seems to be working,’ Divas observed, just quietly enough to disrupt my concentration. ‘What are you looking for?’

‘Frakked if I know,’ I snapped, shutting him up, and turning back to the keypad.

Jurgen pointed to one of the icons encrusting the cogwheel. ‘That looks like a picture of the ship,’ he offered helpfully, underlining the point with a waft of halitosis. None of the others looked remotely familiar, so I selected it, and a three-dimensional image of the *Hand of Vengeance* appeared, rotating slowly, flickering slightly in the fashion of all such devices. A couple of points on its hull were coloured red, stark crimson blemishes, which penetrated a deck or two beneath the skin like ugly wounds. As we stared at it, trying to understand the information we were getting, another appeared, and almost simultaneously I felt that faint vibration through the deck plates once more.

‘What does that mean?’ Divas asked. The palms of my hands tingled again. Nothing good, of that I was sure.

‘We’re taking damage.’ Karrie replaced the vox-line, her expression strained. ‘The ork fleet was waiting for us.’

‘How could they know?’ Divas asked. ‘We made the transit by accident, didn’t we?’

‘Apparently not.’ Karrie’s voice was clipped and decisive. ‘The Navigator’s down, due to some massive psychic shock, and ours isn’t the only one. Nearly half the flotilla’s been knocked back into the materium well outside the deployment zone, and the greenies are using us for target practice. Luckily some of the warships came through too, or we’d be floating scrap by now.’

‘How could they do that?’ Divas asked, his face white. Karrie shrugged.

‘Who cares?’ I said, my mind already racing. ‘We have to rejoin the regiment, and get the shuttles away.’ I reached for my comm-bead, hoping

Mostrue would have had the common sense to begin embarking the gunners. 'If we can't get the artillery planetside we might just as well have stayed on Keffia.' The guns were the least of my worries, of course, but seeing them safe would be the best excuse for getting off the ship as quickly as possible. With any luck the greenskins would be so busy blowing up the starships they wouldn't have much attention or ammunition to spare for the relatively miniscule shuttles. A moment later my hand fell away again. The comm-bead, along with practically everything else that might have been useful to us in this unexpected crisis, was sitting back in my quarters.

'You're right, of course.' Divas nodded, apparently taking fresh heart from my words. 'What's the quickest way back to the hangar bay?'

'Down here.' Karrie indicated the route we should follow, and switched off the lectern, no doubt hoping we'd memorised it. Having grown up in a hive, the three-dimensional maze had imprinted itself on my subconscious almost as soon as I'd glanced at it, so I was sure my innate sense of direction would be enough to see me safe to our destination if we lost contact with our guide. Divas looked a little more dubious, but tagged along, keeping as far away from Jurgen as he reasonably could. 'I'll take you as far as the portside access corridor, after that you're on your own. I've got to get to my post.'

'Understood,' I said, breaking into a run again as she began to lead us through the belly of the ship. In truth we could only have been moving for a handful of minutes, but the jolt of adrenaline and the uncomfortable sensation of waiting for the next tremor in the deck plating, wondering if the enemy weapons would strike close enough to kill us next time, seemed to stretch the moment interminably. At length, however, Karrie pointed to another hatch apparently identical to the one by which we'd entered this strange, hidden realm behind the corridors we'd become so familiar with over the past few weeks.

'Through here,' she said, pressing a rune beside the portal, and it hissed open. Once again, a babble of agitated voices and the clanging of boot soles against deckplates assailed my ears. The volume was noticeably lower, however, so presumably most of the Guardsmen aboard had managed to rejoin their units, and the vast majority of the crew was at their posts.

As we emerged into the corridor itself I hesitated for a second, Jurgen at my side, in an attempt to orientate myself. I had a pretty good idea of where we were, and a moment later I recognised a landmark, the vivid scarlet icon

of an emergency lifepod, one of hundreds placed at strategic positions around the hull. The identification number told me we were on deck seventy-four, section twelve, only a few hundred metres from the hold where our Earthshakers had been stored.

‘You should find your way from here easily enough,’ Karrie said as a couple of Guardsmen hurried past, Catachans without a doubt, their heavily muscled torsos betraying their world of origin as clearly as their uniforms. I was about to reply when the deck seemed to twist beneath my feet, with a shriek of rending metal, and the ceiling suddenly became a great deal closer. The lights went out abruptly, to be replaced a moment later by dull red luminators which strobed like a panicked heartbeat. Sirens began to wail, sounding curiously attenuated.

‘What the hell was that?’ Divas shouted, over a dull roaring sound which reminded me of a distant wastefall¹⁵ echoing though the underhive. I shook my head, momentarily dazed, and tried to clamber up again. Somehow the task seemed harder than it should, as though I was fighting against a strong wind. As I regained my feet I began to realise that this was precisely what was happening.

‘Hull breach!’ Karrie was running down the corridor even as she flung the words back over her shoulder, the wind tugging at her as she did so, making her unfastened jacket and long, dark hair flutter like banners. ‘Hurry, before the deck seals!’

The rest of us needed no further urging, you can be sure, stumbling after her as fast as we could. Some tens of metres away, to my horrified dismay, heavy steel doors began to slide across the passageway, sealing it off, and condemning us all to an agonising death. It was like running in a dream, where the more effort you put into forcing your limbs to move, the slower they become, the object you’re striving to reach receding with every step.

‘Come on, sir! Nearly there!’ Jurgen held out a grime-encrusted hand, which I took gratefully, lagging as I was further and further behind the others. My commissarial greatcoat was catching the rush of air like a sail, slowing me down even more. I began to curse the impulse to arm myself before leaving my stateroom, although I was to be grateful enough for it before too long, since the tightly buckled weapon belt prevented me from shrugging the encumbering garment off. We weren’t going to make it, I could tell, the thick slabs of metal moving closer and closer together as I watched...

Abruptly their progress halted, and I caught a glimpse of the two Catachan troopers straining to keep them apart, their overdeveloped muscles bulging with the effort. No ordinary men could have managed it, but the natives of that hellish jungle world are made of unusually stern stuff, and to my delighted astonishment they seemed to be prevailing. Faces contorted with stress, they shouted encouragement as our battered quartet neared safety at last.

‘Cai!’ Divas hesitated on the threshold, turning back to stretch out a hand towards Jurgen and myself, urging us on, and incidentally blocking the gap as he did so. Karrie slipped past him, her slight frame a distinct advantage under the circumstances. ‘Come on!’

‘Get in there!’ I shouted in return, barging him through, desperate to get to safety. Knocked off balance by my frantic charge, he stumbled into the Catachans.

Slight as the impact of that collision was, it was enough. Among the strongest specimens of humanity they may have been, but even their mighty muscles couldn’t tolerate the strain of keeping that heavy portal open for long. As their concentration wavered they were finally overwhelmed, the frantically whining servos gaining the upper hand at last. I had a final glimpse of Karrie’s horrified face as the slabs of metal clashed together, then Jurgen and I were hopelessly trapped, seconds away from death.



Editorial Note:

The ambush of the relieving fleet in the outer system was the first indication the Imperial forces had that Korbul possessed a grasp of tactics considerably more sophisticated than most of his kind; indeed the trap was sprung with a precision which would have done credit to an Imperial task force. As to the question of how it was achieved, the following document should prove highly illuminating.

Extract from the transcript of the evidence of Inquisitor Ghengis Singleton of the Ordo Xenos to the Admiralty Commission of Enquiry into the losses sustained in the so-called Siege of Perlia, recorded 449 924 M41.

Admiral Benjamin Bowe (Chairman): *You mean the greenskins have psykers too?*

(General consternation, audible intakes of breath, and invocations of the Holy Name.)

Inquisitor Singleton: *That appears to be the case, yes. Instances have been recorded by all three ordos of the Inquisition, although detailed investigation of the phenomenon has generally been regarded as my own purview. Where greater knowledge of such unholy matters is required for a thorough analysis, the Ordo Hereticus has generally proven helpful, however.*¹⁶

Admiral Bowe: *How common are these abominations among the orks?*

Inquisitor Singleton: *Incredibly rare, far more so than among most other races we know about, including humans.*

(General expressions of relief.)

Admiral Bowe: *But extremely powerful, it would seem.*

Inquisitor Singleton: *That would depend on the individual, just as it does with other races.*

Admiral Bowe: *But to knock out a dozen navigators with a single blow...*

Inquisitor Singleton: *Would indeed require an exceptionally powerful adept, or, more likely, several lesser individuals working in concert. We know that the orks have an innate tendency to group action under stress, and it seems reasonable to assume that the same thing would apply to their psykers.*

Commissar Andersen Trevellyan (Commissariat observer): *In other words, you're guessing.*

Inquisitor Singleton: *Drawing conclusions from previous observation of the species. Our colleagues in the Ordo Hereticus, whose understanding of matters related to warpcraft far exceeds my own, generally concur with this hypothesis.*

The Honorable Gianello Marcheisi (Navis Nobilitae observer): *There is also a tendency for such abilities to be amplified by direct exposure to the warp, is that not so?*

Inquisitor Singleton: *Such is my understanding, yes. But such a course would be unthinkable dangerous. The use of psychic abilities in the warp, unshielded, would attract the attention of powers and entities of almost incalculable might and malevolence.*

Navigator Marcheisi: *Nevertheless. (Activates hololith.) I would draw your attention to this sensor contact, recorded by several of the surviving vessels just prior to their sudden transition to the materium. An ork vessel lurking in the warp, is it not?*

Admiral Bowe: *We have considered this matter already. The vessel is clearly a hulk, a severely damaged Brute-class assault ship, with barely*

enough engine power left to maintain its position against the warp currents. Life support aboard is insufficient to sustain its crew for more than a few hours.

Inquisitor Singleton: A full crew, perhaps, but a handful of weirdboyz?

Admiral Bowe: You must forgive me, inquisitor, I'm unfamiliar with the word.

Inquisitor Singleton: An ork term for their equivalent of psykers. Could this ship have sustained a small group of them for a protracted period?

Admiral Bowe: I presume so. Your point being?

Navigator Marcheisi: Name of the Emperor, are you always so dense? It's perfectly obvious what he's suggesting!

Inquisitor Singleton: This vessel was probably stationed where it was, on the most likely warp current to be bringing reinforcements, with a complement of ork psykers. Their powers boosted by direct contact with the warp, they were able to unleash a psychic attack intended to disable the Navigators of the approaching ships, and force them back into the materium where the ambushing force was waiting.

Admiral Bowe: Emperor on Earth! How likely are we to encounter this tactic again?

Inquisitor Singleton: Given that the psykers in question would undoubtedly have been consumed by the warp entities attracted by the flare of energy within a matter of moments, I would say that all depends on how many weirdboyz your adversaries have at their disposal, and how expendable their warlord considers them to be.



THREE

My feelings at that moment, as I was left goggling at my reflection in those damnable shutters, can only be imagined. Certainly I have no wish to recall them now. Anger at Divas's well-meaning obtuseness, which had led to our present position, would undoubtedly have predominated, had there been room for any emotion in my heart other than bowel-freezing terror. Glancing around in blind panic, I met Jurgen's imperturbable gaze, and his habitual phlegmatism began to have a curiously calming effect on me. As usual he seemed to be under the impression that I had everything under control, and for some reason the notion of losing face in front of my aide began to seem almost as bad as the prospect of imminent death. If these really were my final moments, I thought, at least I would meet them with as much dignity as I could manage under the circumstances.

'What do we do now, sir?' he asked, the rapidly thinning air attenuating his voice as well as his odour, which was at least one dubious benefit of our position. As my gaze skittered over his shoulder, a large black rectangle on the wall of the corridor caught my eye, and I puzzled at it for a moment, oxygen starvation already beginning to slow my thoughts. I could recall nothing there that might account for it. Perhaps an open maintenance hatch, like the one we'd entered the corridor by—

'Run for it!' I gasped, the coin dropping at last, and forcing my limbs into a drunken stagger. The panel wasn't black at all, it was red, the same colour as the emergency lighting: the beacon marking the position of the lifepod I'd idly noticed a few moments before. The gale, which had buffeted us ever since the torpedo strike,¹⁷ had moderated to a light breeze by now and the last few traces of air would be gone in moments. Needing no further urging, Jurgen fell in beside me.

In all honesty, I don't think either of us could have made it over that short, interminable distance without the support of the other. If you've ever seen a couple of inebriates holding each other up as they progress erratically down the boulevard, you'll have a good idea of the spectacle we must have made. Fortunately, as I've said before, the rapidly thinning air had taken Jurgen's body odour with it, or close physical proximity to him would have made the prospect of asphyxiation seem rather more attractive as an alternative. As it was, I tried not to think too much about his habitual lack of personal hygiene, which was quite easy given that most of my brain seemed to be shutting down, all my thoughts becoming focussed on putting one foot in front of the other and forcing my labouring lungs to take one more increasingly tenuous breath.

Abruptly we slammed into the bulkhead, and I blinked the brown fog swirling across my vision away as best I could. The red panel was right in front of me, flickering like a badly tuned pictcaster, and I groped for the large handle recessed into the wall, tugging at it with all the strength I could muster.

If I'd had the breath to spare, or any at all by that point, I don't doubt that I would have screamed with frustration. In my weakened condition I could barely budge it. I tried to call out to Jurgen to help me, but an eerie silence had descended about us, and I felt the last of the air in my lungs erupt from my body in a chest-rattling belch. In a handful of moments it would all be over.¹⁸

Fortunately, Jurgen had realised what I was trying to do, and his grubby hands closed over mine, his bitten nails contrasting oddly with my own neat black gloves. Our combined weight was sufficient to shift the lever at last, and it descended smoothly, dropping to the horizontal almost at once. Immediately, a hatch in the wall slid aside, and the two of us tumbled through it with rather more haste than dignity, ending up in a tangled heap at the bottom of a short flight of uncomfortably hard metal steps. Blessed light, the normal yellowish white of properly functioning luminators, washed over us, revealing an open space about the size of a cargo module. I couldn't make out much more at the time, as it seemed to be full of crash webbing, which obscured my view of the walls and the further end.

Fighting my way free of my aide's encumbering limbs, I staggered upright, and smacked the palm of my hand against a prominent activation rune on the wall.

A metal hatch descended smoothly behind us, cutting off our view of the steps we had so precipitously descended, and a dull roaring sound gradually became audible in the fabric of the shelter we'd found.

Abruptly, my labouring lungs found something to inhale and I felt my chest inflating. After the desperate privations we'd suffered, the sensation was intoxicating, and I found myself laughing wildly as the rush of oxygen hit my synapses.

'We made it!' I cried, my voice still attenuated to little more than a bat squeak, while Jurgen hauled himself upright, a broad grin across his face.

'That we did,' he agreed. Then the familiar expression of puzzlement slowly eclipsed it. 'So what do we do now?'

'Well we can't go back out there,' I pointed out reasonably. Things were beginning to look up, so far as I could see. It seemed we had found a safe refuge, where I could rest for a while, try and find out what was going on, and decide how to put the best gloss I could on what had happened. It wouldn't take much to make Divas believe that I'd seen the doors about to close and heroically pushed him to safety, heedless of the almost certain cost of my own life...

'Emergency pressurisation complete,' a mechanical voice intoned through the ringing in my ears. 'Launch sequence running. Launch in ten seconds.'

'What?' I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Just when I'd thought we were safe from harm, it seemed we were about to be spat out into the middle of a space battle. 'Abort launch! Abort!'

'Launch in five seconds,' the voice persisted, with the single-mindedness of all cogitator systems. It seemed verbal control hadn't been installed, or if it had been there was no time to work out how to activate it. I lunged for the nearest set of crash webbing.

'Jurgen!' I yelled. 'Get strapped in!'

We just made it in time, before what felt like a very large boot kicked me in the fundament, and the world went spinning.



FOUR

Since that occasion I've been in rather more space battles than I care to contemplate, but I have to say that the Siege of Perlia stands out in my memory more vividly than most. Partly, of course, that's because in the majority of cases I've either been watching the progress of the action in a hololith somewhere, which induces a certain detachment into the proceedings, or I've been otherwise engaged in hand-to-hand combat with enemy boarders (or to be more accurate trying to avoid them) which leaves little or no time to worry about what's going on in the rest of the fleet. Mainly, I suspect, it was simply the complete novelty of the situation I found myself in.

As the surge of acceleration died away, I realised I was now drifting freely in the crash webbing, obscurely grateful that it had been some hours since I'd last eaten. Evidently the automatic systems on board hadn't gone so far as to turn on the gravity for us.¹⁹ Kicking free of the restraints with some difficulty, I took stock of our surroundings.

Our refuge was surprisingly roomy, having been designed, I was later to discover from the instruction slate, to take twenty evacuees under ideal conditions, and two and a half times that number at a pinch. The compartment we'd found ourselves in took up the majority of the available space, lined with storage lockers between metal buttresses of comforting looking solidity, and floored with thick mats which would double up as sleeping space if the pod had taken more than its nominal complement aboard. (Ten of the lockers were later to prove to be fold-out bunks, however, so we never had to trust ourselves to their dubious comfort.) At that moment, most of the interior space was still choked with strands of webbing, stirring fitfully in the current from the recirculators, which gave

the whole place an incongruous air of dereliction, as if it had fallen into disrepair and become home to innumerable spiders.

Kicking my way free of the entangling fibres, and slowly recalling the lessons hammered painfully home in the nullgrav room of the schola, I pushed off in the general direction of the hatchway at the opposite end of the chamber. To my vague surprise I missed it by less than a metre, and a few seconds of fumbling were enough to get me close enough to trip the latch and push it open.

I wasn't quite sure what I expected to find beyond it, but my first shocked impression was one of open space. My mind remained focussed enough for me to realise that that was impossible, however, and as I took in more of my surroundings it rapidly became clear that I was staring at an armourcrys shield, not unlike the one in front of the pilot's station of a conventional shuttle. The cold light of innumerable stars punched into the tiny flight deck, which was no more than a couple of metres across in any direction, whirling across our field of vision with dizzying speed.

'What are those streaks?' Jurgen asked, wallowing through the hatchway behind me like an ungainly skywhale,²⁰ his odour preceeding him as always, and I found myself hoping that rescuers would be quick to arrive.

'The stars,' I told him shortly. 'We must be tumbling.' I made my way to the control lectern, fastening the straps thoughtfully provided to keep me in the seat, and began trying to work out how to bring our refuge under some kind of control. I presume it was this happy accident, as much as anything else, which led to our survival, as none of the ork gunners seemed willing to target us, no doubt thinking we were just another piece of debris from the battle.²¹

Fortunately, the pod had evidently been designed in the expectation that whoever found refuge aboard it would be in no condition to deal with any complicated systems, and most of its functions proved to be under the control of the cogitator which had so precipitously flung us out into space. A few moment's browsing through the pictograms, helpfully projected in front of my face as soon as I sat down, was sufficient to give me a rough idea of what I needed to do, and a few cautious experiments with the dials and levers in front of me was enough to steady our progress.

As the streaks of light beyond the armourcrys slowly settled down, reverting to the pinpoints of light I'd grown familiar with from the observation decks of most of the vessels I'd travelled on since my

childhood in the underhive had been so abruptly curtailed, we began to get an idea of the scale of the conflict going on around us. Contrary to what you might see in an episode of *Attack Run*,²² starships in combat seldom approach to within point blank range of one another, exchanging fire at distances of hundreds, if not thousands, of kilometres. There are exceptions, of course; you have to get close to your target to launch boarding parties or knock out a fighter screen, for instance, not to mention ramming, which is a favourite ork tactic.²³ Even so, we were able to pick out the positions of the combatants by the sudden flares of light as another lance or torpedo volley struck home, and once by a peculiar sensation of sickness and disorientation as space itself seemed to twist in the middle of my field of vision, sucking some luckless victim into the hell of the warp as its engines exploded.²⁴

‘We seem to have a couple of options,’ I said after a while, as the distant firework display became evermore intermittent. One of the systems I’d found was a locator beacon, which would pinpoint our exact position for anyone who might be listening or looking for survivors. ‘We could just fire this up, and wait to be rescued.’

As my finger hovered over the activation rune, I hesitated. There was an auspex screen embedded in the control lectern in front of me, and a positive blizzard of contact icons fogging it up. Some of them might be nothing more threatening than debris, of course, but the vast majority seemed very solid for that, not to mention clearly manoeuvring under power, and far too many of them were noticeably closer than the little cluster of Imperial icons clinging on doggedly to one side of the imager.

‘Although that might not be such a good idea,’ I concluded, withdrawing my hand at last. Clearly, we were heading through the bulk of the ork fleet, and any distress beacon we activated would be far more likely to attract their attention than that of any friends in the vicinity. Besides, they all seemed to have more than enough problems of their own. Jurgen nodded, as if he understood.

‘What’s the other one?’ he asked.

I shrugged. ‘Head for the planet, and make contact with our forces there,’ I said. According to the instructions I was reading, the cogitator ought to be able to take care of that, and once our course was set, we stood a reasonable chance of slipping through the enemy fleet without attracting too much attention. I hoped. In any event, it seemed like a better chance of survival than trying to hitch a lift with the greenskins.

‘How long would that take?’ Jurgen asked.

I shrugged again, and retrieved the appropriate information after a little searching through our tiny craft’s limited databanks. ‘About three weeks,’ I concluded.

That didn’t sound too bad – it would have taken the troopship a little under half that to coast in from this far out on the fringes of the system, assuming it survived the engagement at all. To my vague surprise I found myself hoping that it did. I’d always been something of an outsider in the command battery, the only friend I had among the officers there being Divas, as I’ve said before, but most of the others were at least civil to me (my inadvertent reputation for heroism tending to at least balance the instinctive dislike and distrust most of them had for members of the Commissariat, if not actually outweigh it).

As for the common troopers, I’d been careful to give them the impression that I cared about their welfare, so they tended to watch my back when things got sticky rather than start thinking about one of the unfortunate friendly fire accidents which tend to terminate the careers of overly enthusiastic commissars. All in all, I was as comfortable there as I ever expected to be, and the thought of having to establish myself all over again in another posting was unexpectedly disturbing.

As it turned out, of course, it was to be the events of the next few months which were to attract the attention of the senior members of the Commissariat for the first time, marking me down as someone whose career might be worth keeping an eye on, eventually bouncing me into a position at Brigade Headquarters which was to put my life in danger more often than I care to contemplate; but I’m getting ahead of myself.

‘Three weeks doesn’t sound so bad,’ my aide volunteered, leaning closer to read the tiny screen, and giving me the benefit of his halitosis again. At that point it struck me that taking our chances with the greenskins might not be quite such a bad idea after all, but fortunately common sense and my innate survival instinct combined to override the impulse and I nodded. Three weeks in a confined space with Jurgen was not going to be one of the most pleasant experiences of my life, but it certainly seemed preferable to the alternatives. (Just how much preferable I still had no idea, of course, but that blissful state of ignorance was to be dispelled soon enough.)

In retrospect, the long, slow fall to Perlia was almost relaxing, although at

the time I must confess I didn't think so. Suffice it to say that being cooped up with Jurgen in a volume of space scarcely larger than a cargo module was as trying to the patience and the sensibilities as I'd feared, and the knowledge that every day that passed brought us closer to a desperate and bloody conflict hardly helped to improve my mood. The one bright spot was that the supplies we discovered in the lockers were more than adequate to sustain the pair of us, so at least rationing wasn't an issue. If anything, I put on a little weight, despite the monotony of the diet.

My aide being something less than a sparkling conversationalist, I spent most of the trip practising with my chainsword, running through drills and attack patterns repeatedly for hours at a stretch. I'd always been reasonably competent with the weapon, but such a sustained amount of practice, I was gratified to discover, raised my level of skill with it to an unprecedented degree. A fact I was to become grateful for sooner than I expected.²⁵ As a result, I had little time to brood about what might be waiting for us when we arrived at our destination, which, given the level of apprehension I would no doubt have been experiencing otherwise, was no bad thing. A further advantage of this habit was that Jurgen generally retreated to the cockpit while I was performing these exercises, the space in the main living quarters being uncomfortably cramped for an audience desirous of retaining most of their limbs, where he amused himself as best he could in the absence of his collection of porno slates in some fashion I deemed it best not to enquire about.

All in all I'd settled into something of a routine as the days went by, the unvarying glow of the luminators within our fragile refuge and the star speckled darkness outside combining to almost soporific effect, so when the cogitator chimed one morning and announced in its habitual monotone that we were approaching orbit, I was taken completely by surprise.

'Do you want me to activate the beacon, sir?' Jurgen asked, standing to make way for me in the single seat of the tiny flight deck.

I shook my head. 'Probably unwise at this stage.'

I indicated the rash of contacts blizzarding across the auspex screen. 'We haven't a clue how many of these are hostiles.' No doubt a more sophisticated sensor suite would have been able to tell us, and for all I know save us an inordinate amount of subsequent trouble, but right then the risk seemed just as bad as it had before. Instead, I activated the voxcaster. 'Let's get an idea of the situation before we commit ourselves.'

In the event, my caution was justified. As the limb of the planet rose gently across our viewport, I spun the dial, listening in to as much of the vox traffic as I could pick up. Most of it was scrambled, of course, so that wasn't much help, but I was able to overhear snatches of what sounded like naval orders, and the harsh gutturals of orkish, without making much sense out of either.²⁶ At length, however, I was able to make out something, which sounded vaguely like a spaceport traffic control and cut into it with my commissarial override code.

'This is Commissar Ciaphas Cain, aboard a lifepod from the *Hand of Vengeance*,' I transmitted. 'Requesting retrieval, or landing instructions.' In truth I hadn't a clue how to land the thing, but the cogitator seemed as capable of doing that for us as everything else it had handled since we first stumbled aboard.

After a short pause, during which I swear I could hear muttered voices in the background, someone answered in clipped feminine tones.

'Unidentified contact, say again.' With a distinct sinking feeling I did so, drinking in the sight of the planet below us as it rose fully into view. Thin wisps of high cloud drifted in its upper atmosphere, setting off the sunlight glittering from the turquoise oceans, while lush greens and deep browns marked the continents below. After three weeks surrounded by drab grey walls and breathing Jurgen's recycled flatulence it seemed almost impossibly beautiful. When the voice responded again it sounded slightly puzzled.

'The *Hand of Vengeance* broke orbit three days ago.' At those words my spirits lifted more than I would have believed possible. 'All survivors of the battle should have been accounted for.'

'We've been busy,' I said, with what I felt was commendable understatement at the time. 'Did the 12th Field Artillery come through all right?'

'You can't seriously expect me to answer that.' The voice took on a faintly suspicious tone. 'Can you give me some positive identification?'

'Emperor's teeth!' I said with some asperity. 'I'm using a commissarial vox code, for warp's sake! How much more positive do you want me to be?'

'A code assigned to a commissar reported killed in action,' the voice shot back. I sighed, keeping my temper with a considerable effort.

'Are you implying I might be an ork?' I asked incredulously.

‘You were asking about the disposition of Imperial combat units,’ the star port drone replied.

‘I was trying to find out if my friends survived!’ I retaliated. Well, that was stretching things a bit, but in my experience a bit of emotional blackmail never hurt when you were trying to get the response you wanted out of a woman. This one might just as well have been a servitor for all the good it did me on that occasion, though.

‘If you’re really a commissar you should know better than to discuss such matters on an open channel,’ she snapped back.

‘What do you mean *if*?’ I responded, outraged. ‘Get a recovery shuttle up here and I’ll soon show you who I am!’

‘Low orbital operations are too hazardous at this time,’ the woman said, with an unmistakable air of satisfaction. ‘Lock on to the star port locator beam and engage the automatic landing systems. We’ll have a reception committee waiting for you.’

‘What do you mean too hazardous?’ I asked, the palms of my hands beginning to tingle again. But the vox-link had gone dead. After a moment or two of inventive profanity, which did nothing practical to help but relieved my feelings a little, I began to ferret through the cogitator systems in search of the appropriate rituals. Long before I could complete the task, however, I was to receive the answer to my question; a series of heavy impacts rang against the hull, alarms began to squawk, and the all-too-familiar sound of venting air began roaring through our fragile little craft.



Editorial Note:

This seems as good a point as any to insert a little more background detail about the tactical situation at the time. As before, Kallis gives a commendably concise overview of the prevailing state of affairs, and places the incident Cain is describing into a wider context which perhaps makes things a little clearer than his own unvarnished narrative.

From *Green Skins and Black Hearts: The Ork Invasion of Perlia* by Hismyonie Kallis, 927 M41

Though it was undeniably the greatest tactical surprise of the war in space, and not to be repeated,²⁷ the Battle of the Halo²⁸ was to establish unquestionable ork supremacy in this theatre of operations; an advantage they were to cling to grimly for the rest of the conflict. Indeed even to this day isolated pockets of greenskin pirates are said to remain within the Perlia system, picking off the odd freighter, and biding their time to strike again.

Though it only succeeded in destroying five of the relieving ships,²⁹ and ork losses were, if anything, slightly greater, the ambush succeeded in its primary aim. Forewarned by astropathic messages, subsequent convoys were forced to drop out of the warp far further out than they otherwise would have done for fear of suffering a similar fate, running the gauntlet of sustained attacks for two weeks or more rather than the handful of days they would normally have expected to endure. The resulting attrition to much needed supplies and personnel, not to mention the morale of the merchant crews exposed to these terrifying conditions, was to have the gravest of effects on the fighting ability of the Guard units which had already made it

to the surface of the planet, and the sorely pressed survivors of the Planetary Defence Forces. Nevertheless, by the grace of the Emperor, they held on, every drop of aid which succeeded in making it through the greenskin blockade an incremental step closer to final victory.

By this point, the greenskins had also gained complete air superiority over the territory they'd managed to occupy, their pilots launching hit and run raids against the supply ships in orbit from the landing strips their invading armies had been able to capture. Opposing them were the vessels of the Imperial Navy, which had set up an impregnable defence over the strategically vital star port on the Western continent, and their own fighter wings, which engaged these marauders whenever they appeared above the atmosphere. Unfortunately, not every one could be intercepted before it was able to wreak its damage, and one such opportunistic raider was to come closer than it knew to deciding the whole course of the war...

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FIVE

Had we not been in the cockpit, Emperor alone knows what might have happened to us. I for one had no wish to renew our acquaintance with the physiological effects of hard vacuum, and I struggled to get out of the seat, desperate to get to the leak and plug it before it was too late. Jurgen was ahead of me and slammed the connecting hatch to the main compartment, cutting off the scream of escaping air with a resonant clang as the vacuum beyond it all but snatched the handle from his hands.

‘Well done,’ I said, slumping back into the seat again, my heart hammering, although whether from panic or an automatic response to the thinning of the air I couldn’t have said. Jurgen nodded phlegmatically.

‘Seemed the best thing,’ he said. ‘What hit us?’

‘Probably that,’ I replied, pointing to a fast moving dot on the auspex screen, and keeping my voice steady with considerable effort. ‘Some shower of orbital debris, most likely. There must be tons of it left over from the fighting up here.’ Then the palms of my hands began to itch again. The blip was changing course, clearly coming round for another pass.

‘How’s it doing that?’ Jurgen asked, ingenuous as a juvie.

‘Because someone’s steering it,’ I said, making a grab for the vox again. This time all I could raise was static; evidently some part of our communications equipment had failed to survive the first encounter with our attacker. There was only one option that I could see. ‘We have to get this thing on the ground, now!’

Of course that was a great deal easier said than done. I paged through the pictograms, searching for the right set of instructions, desperation making my hands shake as I did so. Despite the urgency of the task my attention kept coming back to the auspex, and the rapidly closing blip. If it had been

any foe but orks we were facing I've no doubt that we'd have been picked off already, but greenskin weapons tend to be short ranged, and even if they're not, their wielders like to get in close enough to enjoy the bang. Just when I thought we weren't going to make it, I found what I was looking for, and turned back to my aide.

'Hang on to something!' I yelled, and entered the code for an immediate emergency re-entry.

'This program entails a significant risk,' the cogitator droned. 'Please confirm instruction.'

'Just do it, you—' Adjectives, perhaps fortunately, failed me at that point, and I slammed the code in again. However significant the risk might have been, being shredded by cannon fire seemed at the time to be a great deal worse. The blip was almost on top of us, and as I glanced up, I caught a glimpse of a small, fast moving shadow beyond the sheet of armourcrys. Pinpoints of light began strobing from it even as I watched.

'Instruction confirmed,' the mechanical voice intoned. 'Passengers are advised to secure themselves.' Faint vibrations began to shake the hull as more cannon rounds pattered against it, but the rear compartment must have been completely depressurised by now, so hardly any of the noise penetrated as far as the cockpit. I just had time to worry that the systems had been too badly damaged to work, when a sudden surge of acceleration thrust me back down in the chair, and the bottom dropped out of the world.

'Hang on!' I yelled to Jurgen, more for the encouragement the words offered than because I believed it to be physically possible. Monotonous cursing and thudding behind me emphasised the point. Jurgen had a distinct aversion to atmospheric flight at the best of times, and this was far from that: perhaps mercifully, he had too much on his mind to think about airsickness, which was probably just as well for the pair of us. After a moment or two, a louder thud than before resonated through the rising scream of air past the battered hull and his voice went silent. Despite my concern, I remained where I was; he'd either be all right or he wouldn't, and trying to get to him now would only end up incapacitating me as well.

Over the years I've made the trip from orbit to ground uncountable times, and in varying degrees of comfort, but I've seldom felt the experience so vividly. Partly, I suppose, that was because I was screaming in uncontrolled panic at the time (the noise of the superheated air rushing past the hull being so great I can't honestly be sure) and partly because I've hardly ever

been in a position to observe the experience so closely. The air beyond the armourcrys was a vivid ackenberry red, flickering like the aurora round a Titan's void shields, and the ground below was obscured by contrails of boiling air, freezing in our wake. An almost intolerable pressure seemed to be driving the air from my lungs, and the whole pod shook like a twig in a gale.

Despite the impossibility of seeing anything beyond the hellish mist which surrounded us, I kept trying to turn my head in a vain attempt to see if the ork fighter was following us down, intent on finishing the job, but I never caught sight of it again. I can only presume that the pilot, seeing the blazing trail of our re-entry, had assumed that we'd perished and gone to look for another victim.³⁰

After what seemed like an eternity of rattling and banging, which sounded like nothing so much as a hivequake in a scrapyard, the buffeting grew less, and I began to discern a blue sky and wisps of white beyond the armourcrys. Gradually, as the reddish glow receded and the clouds below began to part, I was able to make out something of the landscape below us. Dull red desert sands became visible, a far cry from the lush pastures of Keffia which I'd become so familiar with, dotted here and there with signs of settlement: villages, towns, and once a fair-sized city, all surrounded by irrigated fields or linked by vivid blue waterways, the banks of which were verdant strips a kilometre or two wide. These soon petered out, however, as the sand encroached again on the vegetation that the rivers sustained.

Ominously, most of these habitations seemed to have suffered grievously in the fighting. A thick pall of smoke hung over most of them, and whatever life they supported was too far below us to discern. This was probably just as well, or I would have been too terrified for anything even approaching rational thought.

'Warning.' The cogitator chimed in at just the right moment to puncture the first faint stirrings of optimism I'd started to feel since our precipitous descent had begun. 'Repulsor systems severely compromised. Lift capacity reduced to thirty-seven per cent of design specification. Impact will be significantly higher than designated safety margins.'

'Frakking wonderful!' I snarled, so far gone as to vent my frustration verbally. I realised, too late, that relying on the pod's machine-spirit was our best chance of survival and that hacking it off was probably not a good idea.

Scanning the horizon, I just made out a patch of blue and green in the

middle of the desert surrounding us, the dunes of which were hurtling past uncomfortably close, as we continued to lose altitude; indeed a small, arrow straight sandstorm was beginning to follow our path as the wake of our passage reached the ground. Muttering prayers I was privately sure that the Emperor was too busy to heed, I disengaged the cogitator systems and fiddled with the levers in front of me, hoping I remembered as much as I thought I did about how to control this plummeting death trap manually.

Fortunately, I seemed to have retained enough information to steer the thing, and brought the nose round to point at the oasis I'd spotted a few moments before. It was getting very close, water and trees looming up out of the desert sand and with a jolt, which felt like it had just loosened every tooth in my head, we skimmed the top of one of the largest dunes surrounding it.

'Cut the power, cut the power...' I recited to myself, looking around the lectern for the large red switch I was sure I'd seen there a moment before. Almost at the last minute, I found it, and slammed my hand down on the thing. With a sickening lurch, which would surely have proven too much for Jurgen's tender stomach had he still been conscious to feel it, the repulsor system disengaged entirely and unmodified gravity had us in its grip at last.

My aim was pretty good, even if I do say so myself. We dropped like a white-hot stone almost into the centre of the lake, skipped in an explosion of steam, and ricocheted into the air again, ploughing through the stand of trees fringing the shoreline. As we did so, I thought I saw a gleam of metal somewhere within them, but with the fog we'd created swirling about us, followed almost immediately by splintering wood and thick black smoke as they burst into flame, I had no time to consider the matter. Every muscle and bone in my body seemed to be oscillating in a different direction, and the seat restraints dug into my chest like an eldar wytch's fingernails. My vision began to grey at the edges, and I started to fear that I was on the verge of losing consciousness.

Abruptly, the sensation of pressure began to ease, however, and the notion gradually filtered into my mind that my desperate gamble had worked. The trees had absorbed a fair bit of our momentum, and we seemed to be moving much more slowly now (although that was still something of a relative term). A dune larger than any I'd yet seen, or perhaps I was merely seeing it a good deal closer than the rest, flashed past, jarring our sturdy

little craft as we clipped the crest of it, and then we were down, gouging a long trench in the sand, and leaving little patches of glass in our wake as the heat of our hull vitrified the site of every bounce.³¹ Eventually the jarring ceased, and to my delighted astonishment I realised that we were down and safe. Well, down and alive, at any rate. As I was shortly to discover, safety was going to be hard to find on Perlia.

For a moment or two, I did nothing but sit, forcing air into my battered lungs, and trying not to feel the little stabs of pain, which shot through every muscle whenever I attempted to move. After a while, when my head had stopped spinning and the white-hot core of agony behind my eyes had receded to a dull, nauseated throbbing, like the most severe hangover imaginable, I fumbled for the harness release. It gave abruptly, and I slid half out of the chair, realising for the first time that our little craft had come to rest canted at a severe angle.

None of the runes on the control lectern were illuminated, and it soon became obvious that the power systems had fused with the impact of our landing. Our gallant little cogitator had become one with the Omnissiah, no doubt starved to death by the lack of energy, so there was no help to be had from that quarter. Barring the intercession of a tech-priest, we weren't going to be able to get the vox up and running, so calling for help didn't look like an option either.

'Jurgen.' Finding my footing with difficulty on the sloping deck, I stumbled around the chair to find my aide sprawled out behind it, an ugly bruise disfiguring his forehead (insofar as it was possible for his appearance to be made appreciably worse). Swift examination in the attenuated sunlight which leaked its way past the mound of sand, all but covering the armourcrys, showed nothing particularly life threatening, his skull apparently too thick to crack by anything short of a bolter round, and as I completed my attempt to determine the extent of his injuries, he began to stir.

'Are we dead?' he asked, cranking his eyes open, and gazing at me with even less comprehension than usual. I shook my head.

'I don't think so,' I said. 'I imagine the Emperor would have put in an appearance by now.' Leaving him to gather what wits he had, I tugged the connecting door open and staggered through into the main compartment.

The first thing which struck me was the smell; burned sand and scorched metal, of course, but overlaid with it, and almost completely masked, the

blessed scent of fresh, clean, unrecirculated air. I sucked it in greedily, like an addict taking an obscure hit, almost intoxicated by the rush of oxygen. Clearly, the hull had been breached somewhere, although whether by the cannon fire we'd taken or by the precipitous mode of our arrival, I couldn't be sure. Several of the lockers had burst open, scattering their contents, and I moved through an ankle deep litter of ration packs and other detritus which would no doubt come in handy later. There was no time to think about that now. I stumbled to the exit hatch like a man in a trance, climbing the tilted floor as doggedly, and with as much effort, as if I was clambering over a mountain pass.

At length, I reached my goal, and set to cranking the heavy hatch open using the manual lever thoughtfully provided for just such a contingency. It slid aside surprisingly easily, and I blessed the foresight of the Adeptus Mechanicus in general, and the acolyte who had designed the thing in particular, as I did so. A bright rectangle of warm, clear sunshine poured in on me, and the intoxicating scent of clean air flooded in after it. Hoisting myself up, I staggered out onto the hull, which still felt warm even through the thick soles of my boots, my ears full of the creaks, ticks, and clangs of cooling metal, and shaded my eyes, eager for a sight of our surroundings.

A shadow shifted in the corner of my vision, and I choked reflexively as the smell of the fresh air was abruptly overpowered by a new and foetid odour.

'Jurgen?' I asked, turning to face the source, but even as I did so the rational part of my mind reminded me that it couldn't be him. For one thing he was still back on the flight deck, and for another the stench made his normal bouquet seem like the dew on a bright spring morning. I barely had time to register its presence, looming over me like what seemed at the time to be a small, angry mountain, before the ork let out a bellow of rage and charged.



SIX

In retrospect, I imagine, the greenskin was as surprised to see me as I was to see it, otherwise it would no doubt have finished the matter before my numbed and battered mind had properly registered its presence. As it was, despite the weakness and stiffness in my scarcely better functioning body, instinct cut in and I evaded its rush reflexively, pivoting on one foot and kicking it in the back of the knee with the other as it hurtled past, bellowing like a bull grox catching wind of a rival. I had a moment of panic, wondering if the old trick would work against a slab of insensate muscle fully a head taller and twice as wide as any human opponent I'd ever faced, even the Catachans I'd occasionally sparred with, but it seemed greenskin joints were sufficiently similar to ours after all. It fell to one knee, yelling even more loudly, if that were possible, as the sizzling metal of the hull scorched through the coarse fabric of its trousers. It half rose, to come at me again, and disappeared through the open hatch with an almost comical yelp of astonishment after I kicked it in the face as hard as I could while it was still off-balance. A resounding crash followed, then the unmistakable crack of a lasgun, two single shots in quick succession.

Confident that Jurgen had been able to deal with the problem, I shielded my eyes against the sun and glanced around rapidly, trying to discern where the thing had come from, and, more importantly, whether or not it had been alone.

No such luck, of course. Harsh guttural voices echoed around the dunes, and from my elevated position atop the hull I was able to see two more flashes of green, moving astonishingly fast, closing in on our position. The quick hand-to-hand scuffle with their fellow had been over so fast I hadn't really had time to take in the full ghastriness of the creature I'd faced, but

these were sufficiently far away for me to be able to make them out in all their grotesquerie.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't quail inwardly at the sight. Despite my confident assertion to Divas that they didn't sound so tough, and the relative ease with which my first attacker had been dispatched, I was bright enough even then to know a serious threat when I saw one. I'd been lucky in that first encounter, I realised that, only instinct and reflexes honed by years of training enabling me to take advantage of my adversary's impetuosity, and Jurgen's intervention hadn't exactly hurt either (well, it had hurt the ork, and a good thing too if you ask me).

For one thing, the creatures running towards me were big, and bulging with muscle in a fashion I'd only previously seen on ogryns. Even a Catachan would have looked distinctly puny next to one of these monstrosities. Tiny red eyes glared from beneath an exaggerated brow ridge, but unlike the holos I'd seen, they were alive with malevolence, and what, if not exactly intelligence, was the kind of instinctive cunning which quite often made up for its lack. I've got to know a great deal more about these creatures over the last century or so, since that first disconcerting encounter, and one thing I've seen time and again is that dismissing them as simple, unreasoning brutes is a fast route to the graveyard (or more likely their stomachs). Despite their bulk they moved swiftly, and with a kind of grace completely at odds with their appearance, every movement economical and precise.

That, above all else, was the thing which most struck fear into my heart. Vast as the power of those hulking muscles undoubtedly was, it was contained and directed, focussed on a single objective, and that was my demise.

'Commissar!' Jurgen appeared at the hatch, a lasgun from the weapons locker cradled in his arms, and Emperor bless him forever, the chainsword I'd left in the main compartment after completing my practice session what could only have been a couple of hours before, thrust through the motley collection of pouches and webbing he was habitually festooned with. I took it gratefully, thumbed the activator, and drew my laspistol from the holster at my belt, feeling instantly more comfortable for the sensation of weapons in my hands again. My aide turned his head to look at our attackers, his mouth set in a faintly self-satisfied grin. It only occurred to me later that, having dispatched the ork which had stumbled into our pod, his mood was

bound to be as cheerful as any Valhallan's would have been under the circumstances. 'Ugly frakkers, aren't they sir?'

'Indeed they are,' I said diplomatically, aware that, as always, the irony of his words would be lost on him. By now, our assailants were close enough to open fire with the crude bolt pistols they carried, but fortunately they proved to be no more accurate with firearms than most of their kind, the explosive projectiles detonating a couple of metres from where we stood. Even so, the noise seemed to excite them, and their pace increased, scrambling up the dunes so fast that for a moment I began to fear that they'd be on us before we could react. Sunlight glittered from the close combat weapons they wielded in their other hands, large stubby axes with short handles, which looked incongruously like something which would have looked more at home in a kitchen than on a battlefield. 'Whenever you're ready.'

I opened fire with my pistol, Jurgen following suit. With relief I saw our las bolts impacting on the torsos of those monstrous assailants, blowing cauterised craters through the dull brown clothing they wore (which blended quite disconcertingly with the desert sands, so that their outlines were blurred, the festering green of their limbs and faces seeming to flicker against the landscape like disembodied parts) and the dense flesh beneath. To my horror, the wounds, which would have dropped a human, barely slowed them, and they charged on blindly: if anything we seemed to have succeeded only in enraging them.

'Waaaaagh!' they yelled, provoked by pain and rage into bellowing the warcry, which no one who has faced these monstrosities can ever forget. I'd never heard it before except through the speakers of a hololith, and although, as I was subsequently to discover, it was nothing compared to the sound produced by hundreds, or even thousands, of ork throats, it was disconcerting enough, let me tell you. It was to save our lives, though. Abruptly I heard it echoed from behind, just in time to turn and face another pair, which had flanked us unnoticed while our attention was fixed on their comrades.

'Frak off!' I parried a downward stroke from one of those large and intimidating axes with my gently humming chainsword, firing four or five las bolts from the pistol in my other hand directly into the creature's exposed belly. To my relief, it staggered back, momentarily blocking the rush of its fellow, which reacted in what I was soon to realise was the

typical manner of all its kind. Without hesitation it smashed its own blade down into the skull of its comrade, releasing a gush of foul smelling ichor, and shouldered the falling body aside in its eagerness to get to me. A charnel stench worse than anything I'd ever experienced (and considering I'd just spent three weeks cooped up in a tiny lifepod with Jurgen that was saying something) rolled over me as it opened its jaws astonishingly wide, and bellowed its bone-shaking warcry. For a moment, my entire field of vision was filled with sharp teeth, tusks, and a gullet, which looked quite capable of swallowing me whole.³²

Almost without thinking, I raised the pistol in my left hand and fired again, a number of shots in rapid succession, straight into that huge and stinking maw. The back of the creature's head exploded, taking whatever brains it had with it. It staggered, staring at me in vapid astonishment for a moment before toppling from the hull to impact against the vitrified sand beneath, with a crack vaguely reminiscent of someone breaking the largest plate in the galaxy.

I whirled round to face our original attackers, to find that Jurgen had switched his lasgun to full auto, and was hosing them down with the same vindictive enthusiasm Valhallans generally displayed while slaughtering their hereditary enemies. Caught in the blizzard of las bolts, the two greenskins staggered at last, dropping to the sand and rolling down the side of the dunes to leak out the last of their lives in what I expected to be no more than a moment or two of feeble twitching. To my astonishment, however, they began crawling back towards us, the lust for bloodshed still burning in their eyes, until a couple of more carefully placed shots from my imperturbable aide blew their heads apart like overripe melons.

'Well done, Jurgen...' I began, when my aide's head snapped around, and he began trying to bring his weapon up to bear in my direction.

'Look out, commissar!' he yelled, still trying to find a target, and forewarned by his cry, I was just able to bring my chainsword up in time. With a roar, which left my already abused ears ringing, the ork whose comrade had so casually struck it down charged at me, swinging its cleaver again. Unbelievably, the head wound, which would have proved fatal to a man had, it seemed, barely stunned it, and the belly wounds I'd inflicted hardly slowed it down at all. Ignoring the atavistic voice in the back of my head which gibbered in panic at the creature's seeming invulnerability, I moved instinctively to counter its rush. It wasn't unkillable, we had four

pieces of evidence to prove it lying all around us; I just needed to find its weak point. In the meantime, a slash across the torso from my trusty chainblade ought to slow it down a bit... I swung the weapon, ducking under a massive forearm, and was rewarded with another roar of anger as my blade connected.

Ichor continued to pump from the gash in its skull as I danced away, trying to open the distance between us enough to give Jorgen a clear shot at the thing, but it was hellish fast, and closed with me again before I could do so. It blinked, trying to clear its vision, and I took advantage of its momentary distraction to get in under its guard again, striking at its leg. The humming blade struck deep, whining against bone for a moment, and the greenskin staggered, bellowing another challenge. For the first time, it seemed less sure of itself, its movements a little less controlled, and I evaded another desperate swing of its axe with almost contemptuous ease. The blow had been a wild one, and I countered it easily, taking the creature's arm off just above the elbow with a gush of foul smelling fluid that sprayed the surrounding sand and hull, missing me by millimetres.

That ought to have been enough to subdue any opponent, but once again I underestimated the ork capacity for berserker rage and lack of instinct for self-preservation. Instead of collapsing, it surged to its feet, roaring just as loudly as before, staggering slightly as it favoured its wounded leg. That was enough: I sidestepped, striking at its back, and severed the thing's spinal column. It fell at last, rolling down to join its comrades, and twitched for a moment before finally becoming still.

'Nice work, sir,' Jorgen said, lowering his weapon.

I looked around us, breathing hard, not quite daring to believe it was all over at last. 'Is that the last of them?' I asked.

My aide nodded. 'Must be,' he said, with an assurance I quite envied; but then his people had generations of experience fighting these creatures, so I suppose he had good reason for his confidence. 'If there were any more around they'd be all over us by now.'

'Well that's a comfort,' I said, with less sarcasm than I'd intended, then the obvious question struck me. 'But what I want to know is how they found us so fast.'

As it turned out, the answer to that question lay close at hand, and we were able to find it after a relatively brief search. The task was pretty onerous,

however, as both of us were still suffering the effects of our precipitous descent, and the heat of the desert would have been debilitating enough even if we'd both been in the peak of condition to begin with. Not for the first time, I cursed whoever it was who had originally decided that black would be the ideal colour for a commissarial uniform, and discarded the greatcoat (which, in the normal course of events I found extremely welcome, surrounded as I usually was by iceworlders who tended to adjust the temperature in their quarters to levels more usually reserved for the preservation of food). Jorgen, no doubt, found the high temperatures even more onerous than I did, but accepted them as he did everything else with his habitual stoicism.

I'd insisted on resting for a while before commencing our scouting expedition, grabbing some food and water, and was heartily glad I had done so, despite the presence of our uninvited guest inside the pod. The temperature within had risen considerably,³³ and as you can well imagine the scent of baking ork wasn't exactly a spur to the appetite. After a while, and with considerable effort, we were able to lug the cadaver outside, where it joined its comrades on a makeshift charnel heap.

'We ought to burn them,' Jorgen said, which I gathered was some sort of superstition among the Valhallans, although since the greenskins were all indisputably dead I couldn't really see the point.³⁴ It was moot anyway, the arms locker aboard our little craft not having any flamers among its inventory, so we deferred the matter in favour of exploration and set out in the direction from which our attackers had come.

Fortunately, the tracks they'd left were easy to follow, and after some moments of floundering up and down the shifting sands of the endless dune fields, we reached one of the narrow, rocky defiles the Tallarns call wadis. There, the furrows they'd left in their wake died away, although the occasional boot print was still visible in the thin scattering of dust which coated the ground, and we were able to make reasonable progress. In fact, now we were free of the encumbering sand, in which we had sunk to our ankles with every step, I felt almost invigorated, despite the all-pervasive heat.

By this time, we were both perspiring freely, and I paused for a moment to take a mouthful of water from the canteen I'd slung over one shoulder before we set off. As I did so, I caught sight of a bright flash of reflected sunlight from around the next turn of the defile, and motioned Jorgen to

silence. Something metallic was up ahead, that much was certain, although what it was I still had no idea.

Readying our weapons, we moved on cautiously, my mouth drier now than it had been before I'd stopped to drink, and the palms of my hands tingling again, although this time it was simply from nerves rather than a warning from my subconscious. Several times during that painstaking advance my eyes registered that telltale flickering again, although what it presaged I still had no idea.

At length we reached the bend in the defile, and, flattening ourselves against the rock walls, peered cautiously around it. My breath hissed involuntarily through my teeth.

'Vehicles,' I said, although in truth that was paying them something of an unwarranted compliment. Had we a tech-priest with us, I'm not sure whether he would have burst out laughing on the spot, or tried to exorcise them as an abomination against the machine-spirit. Both, probably; useful as they are on occasion, I have to say most of the cogboys³⁵ I've come across in my long and discreditable career have been the proverbial Emperor short of a tarot deck.

Jurgen nodded. 'Orkish,' he pronounced, with all the assurance of his heritage, although even I had been able to tell that. There were three of the things parked in a wider canyon, into which the wadi we followed opened out like a tributary joining a river,³⁶ and I had never seen a more ramshackle collection of vehicles in my life. Two were a curious hybrid of tractor and motorcycle, with wide tracks where the rear wheels should have been; one clearly intended for a single rider, while the other had two of the elongated treads side by side, separated by a flatbed on which was mounted a large and intimidating heavy weapon, clearly intended to be fired by a passenger. It was this which had been responsible for the flashing I'd seen. The crude sighting device attached to it had come loose, shifting slightly in the wind, intermittently reflecting the blazing sun up the narrow side canyon we'd been following.

The third member of the convoy looked a little more conventional, being mounted on four sturdy wheels. Like its curious companion, it had a pintle-mounted weapon, which I recognised as an Imperial pattern heavy bolter, no doubt looted and installed by whatever debased equivalent of our own tech-priests these grotesque creatures possessed. Scanning the whole area with an amplivisor from the well-stocked lockers of our lifepod, and

detecting no signs of life, I gave the signal to descend.

Close to, the collection of ambulatory scrap we'd chanced across was even less prepossessing. The four-wheeled specimen, which Jurgen kept referring to as a buggy, was well armoured it was true, thick slabs of metal crudely riveted to the chassis, but it had clearly been poorly maintained, if it ever had been at all. Patches of rust and bright silver scoring were scattered equally randomly across its surface, the latter no doubt having been inflicted in combat recently enough not to have oxidised yet, and for reasons I couldn't quite fathom a thick line of red paint had been crudely daubed along both flanks.³⁷

'This must have been the boss's,' my aide opined, clambering up on the thing, and poking around cautiously. After a moment, I joined him, keeping a wary eye out for any betraying flash of movement among the scattering of rocks which surrounded us, and inspected the bolter from force of habit. It seemed fully functional, loaded, and several boxes of ammunition were stacked haphazardly around it.

'How can you tell?' I asked, deferring to his greater knowledge of the creatures we faced without a trace of embarrassment. We'd served together long enough for me to have more confidence in him than anyone else in the regiment, and he knew me well enough not to take a willingness to listen to advice as a sign of weak leadership. (In fact one of the things I go out of my way to try and instil in the young whelps in my charge is to do precisely that; better a moment of embarrassment than a lifetime of ignorance, if you ask me, and on the battlefield, where what you don't know is most definitely going to hurt you, that's liable to be a pretty short span. Besides, there's nothing better calculated to get the Guard officers you'll be serving with to loosen up a bit and establish a tolerable working relationship than showing that you respect their opinions; or at least giving them the impression that you do.)

Jurgen shrugged. 'It's got the biggest guns,' he pointed out reasonably. Well that made sense to me, so I prised myself away from the precious bolter and started rummaging through the storage lockers in earnest. Apart from a few crude tools, evidently used to repair whatever damage couldn't be ignored altogether, there didn't seem to be much, although one proved to contain a human arm, dessicated by the desert heat, thoroughly chewed, and smelling to the Golden Throne.

'Somebody's lunch?' I suggested, pitching the foul thing over the side, and

trying to quell the incipient rebellion in my stomach.

Jurgen nodded grimly. 'They'll eat anything, even each other.'

'How nice,' I said, with a shudder of revulsion. After that, I opened things a little more circumspectly, as you might expect, but there were no more unpleasant surprises. 'I take it one of the others was carrying the rest of the rations?' Perhaps fortunately, there was no sign of anything an ork might consider food on either of the other vehicles.

'Must have been a foraging party,' Jurgen concluded, and I nodded my agreement.

'The question is,' I said, 'where they were going to forage, and where they'd come from in the first place.' I shivered in a sudden gust of chill wind. We'd taken longer than I'd expected to inspect our find, and the sun was beginning to get close to the horizon. Our short sojourn on Desolatia had familiarised me with desert conditions well enough, so I knew that the temperature was about to drop to levels which Jurgen would find positively welcome, and I most certainly wouldn't. 'We'd better get back to the pod.' We could shelter there for the night at least, and try to work out what to do next. We could hardly stay there indefinitely, but on the other hand I had no desire to strike out at random across this wilderness of sand, trusting to blind luck and the Emperor that we'd find our own lines before another ork patrol stumbled across us. Of course, I hadn't the faintest idea at the time how far we actually were from the bulk of the Imperial forces on Perlia, or I would probably have been gibbering in panic by now.

My aide nodded. 'Would this help?' he asked, proffering a tattered scrap of parchment he'd found in one of the lockers on the buggy. I took it, finding it unpleasantly greasy to the touch, and examined the spiderwork of crude lines and strange ork sigils spattered across it, apparently at random. 'It looks like a map.'



SEVEN

We returned to our crippled refuge in higher spirits than I'd anticipated, Jurgen lugging a canister of fuel from the smallest of the vehicles we'd found along with us. It still seemed like a waste of effort to me, but if incinerating the corpses of our erstwhile assailants made him happy then good luck to him. For my part, I tucked the scrap of parchment inside my shirt for safekeeping, trying to ignore the way close contact with it made my skin crawl, and watched him ignite his bonfire with a relatively light heart. It certainly looked cheerful enough as the flames took hold, flickering gently against the deep purple of the star-flecked sky, and I amused myself for a while, trying to pick out which of the pinpoints of light above us were orbiting starships, until the wind shifted abruptly and the stench of burning meat combined with the deepening chill to drive me back inside the pod.

There, of course, it was almost impossible to see, since the lighting system was as dead as everything else requiring power to function, but once again the well-stocked survival kit came to our aid, and I puzzled at the crude map we'd recovered by the light of a hand luminator balanced on one of the bunks.

It was too canted to sleep on, of course, but I was exhausted enough to feel perfectly comfortable on a nest of rolled-up sleeping bags stuffed into the angle of the bulkhead and floor, and drifted off to sleep as soon as I killed the light. Jurgen, to my unspoken relief, had elected to take a bedroll outside, where he could make the most of the freezing temperature, and his ever-present odour, intensified as always by the daytime heat, had mercifully followed.

Like most Valhallans, Jurgen had a passing familiarity with orkish script,³⁸ and had been good enough to familiarise me with the basics, or at least their

Gothic equivalents, so after a while I was able to work out some of their meaning.

‘If I’m reading this right,’ I said cautiously, while we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of reconstituted soylens viridiens on the hull the next morning, ‘they were camped at the oasis back there.’ I gestured in the direction of the long scar left by the pod as it bounced and slithered to a halt the previous day. Jurgen nodded, leaning in to look more closely at the map I held, and leaving me in no doubt that the rising sun was doing its usual sterling job of bringing out the best of his distinctive bouquet.

‘That’s the symbol for a camp,’ he agreed, ‘and it looks more or less in the right place.’ The map had nothing so sophisticated as a scale of distances, but the sigil he pointed to was more or less in the centre of it, and after a bit of thought I’d been able to match a peculiar wavy line along one edge to a stretch of coastline on the eastern continent.³⁹ I shrugged. We’d descended on the site with the impact of a couple of kilotons of fyceline, so there was no point in going to see if any of the greenskins had survived. More to the point, there wouldn’t be much left back there which would help to sustain Jurgen and myself.

‘Well, we know where they’ve come from,’ I said. I pointed to a spot a short distance from the flattened oasis, ‘and we’re about here.’ There was only one brutish rune further along in that direction and I tapped it with my fingertip. ‘So they must have been heading for this place, whatever that splodge means.’

‘Looks like the symbol for fighting,’ Jurgen volunteered, ‘or lots of enemies.’ He shrugged too, and replenished my mug of recaf from the pot, hissing quietly on the portable stove he’d scavenged from the survival kit before I’d woken. I took the drink gratefully. I’d have preferred a pot of tanna,⁴⁰ to be honest, but the rations aboard the pod had not been packed with Valhallans in mind, and that particular little luxury would have to wait until we’d rejoined our regiment. Assuming they’d managed to survive the attack on our transport ship unscathed, of course.

‘Then that’s where we’ll head for,’ I said decisively. If you’ve read much of these scribblings, my apparent willingness to go charging off in the general direction of what seemed like a battle zone may strike you as uncharacteristic, to say the least, but to my mind anywhere the orks felt was full of enemies sounded like the right place to be. With any, luck we’d be able to make contact with our own forces, and at the very least we ought to

find some PDF trolls to hide behind while we made our way back to the regiment. From which musings you might fairly deduce that I was still blissfully ignorant of just how bad a situation we were actually in.

‘That’ll be a fair trek,’ Jurgen pointed out. ‘We’ll need to get as much of this stuff stowed in the backpacks as we can.’

I nodded. ‘Especially the water,’ I said. Under these conditions we’d need as much of it as we could possibly take with us. I hadn’t exactly had time to admire the scenery on our way down, but I’d seen enough to realise that pockets of civilisation had been few and far between. It was likely to be more than a week before we got anywhere, even if we were lucky. The irony was that the survival pod contained enough to sustain the pair of us for months if necessary, but remaining where we were would simply mean we starved to death later rather than sooner. Better to set out while we were still strong enough to make the arduous journey. Besides, the fact that we’d undoubtedly annihilated the ork camp when we crashed on it was no guarantee that we’d be spared any more unwanted visitors. If another patrol had set out ahead of the one that had attacked us, they could easily stumble across the abandoned vehicles of their compatriots on the way back and come to investigate...

‘Jurgen, I’m an idiot,’ I told him. My aide looked at me quizzically, his mouth hanging open just enough to give me rather too good a look at his half-chewed breakfast. ‘We might not have to abandon the supplies after all. Do you think you could drive that buggy thing?’

A little cautious experimentation was enough to prove that he could, with almost as much elan as he handled the Salamander I habitually requisitioned, and which he drove in a fashion most people unfortunate enough to find themselves in the vicinity generally considered to verge on the life threatening. The ork vehicles were undeniably crude, but that meant that their controls were correspondingly simple, and my aide was able to work them out without too much difficulty. In truth, there was little more to them than a throttle, a steering column, and a brake. Shortly after we’d begun our examination, Jurgen had managed to fire up the engine, and having spent a few moments getting the feel of the sturdy little vehicle, he opened the throttle and disappeared over the rim of the nearest dune in a flurry of sand and profanity.

I was able to follow his progress by the sound of the engine, and after a

few moments he reappeared, a broad grin across his face, and slewed to a halt next to me, raising a miniature sandstorm.

‘It’ll do,’ he conceded, which was about as close as he was likely to come to expressing enthusiasm for anything orkish, and I nodded. Whatever else we’d have to face, we wouldn’t have to walk to wherever we were going, after all. I gestured to the other two vehicles.

‘We’d better get the fuel cans from those,’ I said, beginning to unstrap the nearest. ‘Emperor alone knows where we might find some more out here.’

Jurgen nodded. ‘Best to be on the safe side,’ he conceded.

There was nothing else worth taking on either of them, so once the canisters were safely stowed, I swung myself aboard and directed Jurgen to take us back to the lifepod.

‘One more thing,’ I said as he jerked us into motion again, and swung the heavy bolter, which I’d been clinging to for support. For a moment, I found myself wondering if it would still function for me, its spirit having been corrupted by its enforced servitude in the hands of our enemies, but it had apparently remained loyal to the Emperor and opened up as readily as if it had still been mounted on the Chimera from which it had evidently been ripped. The hail of shells tore the ork bike things to shreds, which was hardly surprising at this range, cooking off the ammunition in their own weapons and igniting the fuel still in their tanks with a most satisfying roar. ‘We don’t want the greenies getting these back, do we?’ (In case you were wondering, it would have been pointless attempting to salvage either one of them for our own use: having been designed for ork physiology, attempting to ride one would have been somewhere between uncomfortable and impossible.)

‘No sir, we don’t,’ my aide agreed, and opened the throttle fully. Our trip back to the pod was mercifully short, but unpleasant nevertheless. The greenskin who’d built the ramshackle vehicle we rode in had either never heard of the concept of suspension, or considered it something for sissies.

By the time we reached our destination, I was beginning to have severe doubts about the wisdom of this course of action, but we didn’t really have much of a choice. Attempting to walk out of the desert would take us far longer, if we even made it out at all, and however uncomfortable the buggy might have been, it was at least well adapted to the terrain. I’d expected us to bog down in the dunes surrounding the crash site, but Jurgen ran us up the treacherous slope as easily as a sump rat up an outfall, and brought us to

a halt outside the pod with an air of triumph I had to admit was well merited.

Our next job was to load up as much of the supplies aboard as we reasonably could. Food and water were our first priority, of course, and after that bedding and ancillary equipment. Most of this I left to Jurgen, his expertise in this area being considerably greater than mine, and went to check on the contents of the arms locker. Apart from the lasgun he'd already used on the orks, and which had remained slung across his shoulders ever since, there were eleven other standard issue assault weapons, along with five boxes of powercells for them.⁴¹ Reluctant to leave anything behind which an enemy might find useful, I added them to the stack of equipment to take with us, a fortuitous decision which, although it seemed like a waste of our limited space at the time, was to turn out to be more than vindicated. I had hoped to supplement them with something heavier, but the pod's designers had obviously decided that if you needed support weapons you'd either be able to find them for yourself or you were done for anyway, and devoted the limited storage space aboard to survival gear and comestibles.

The last thing I found was a drawer full of comm-beads, no doubt intended to let the survivors of a crash landing explore their surroundings without losing touch with one another. I seized them gratefully, slipping one into my ear and running rapidly through the frequencies. My commissarial codes were enough to give me full access to any Imperial transmissions in the vicinity, but to my complete lack of surprise all I could find anywhere was static.⁴² Nevertheless, the familiar feel of the thing in my ear was obscurely comforting, and I picked one up for Jurgen too, along with a number of spares. We weren't all that likely to run into a tech-priest out here, and the last thing I wanted was to lose touch with my aide at a critical moment.

By the time we'd finished loading the buggy, leaving barely enough room for the pair of us to squeeze aboard, the morning was well advanced, and I decided to have one more meal before we set off. Despite our best efforts, there was still a considerable quantity of food left aboard the pod, or a fair amount of the basic ration bars at least, and it seemed a shame to waste any more of them than was strictly necessary. (Although for all I know they're still sitting there under a sand dune, as close to edible as they ever were. As the old Guardsman's joke has it, the main reason they last so long is that no one with any possible alternative would actually eat one.)

Despite their usual, and probably fortunate, lack of any clearly identifiable flavour, we ate a couple apiece, and tucked a few more away in our pockets just to be on the safe side. (My greatcoat had been stowed on the buggy, of course, the searing desert temperatures making any other course of action patently ridiculous, but I had a bit of room left in my trousers, and Jurgen, as always, had a motley collection of pouches and webbing pieces hanging off his torso armour like undergrowth clinging to a tomb.)

‘Well then,’ I said at last, tearing myself away from our refuge with a surprising amount of reluctance, ‘I suppose we ought to be going.’ I scrambled aboard the buggy, wedging myself as comfortably as I could between the heavy bolter and some crates of survival equipment, and waited while Jurgen fired up the engine, which belched a plume of foul smelling exhaust into the clear desert air. ‘Time we saw what’s out there.’

Had I known, of course, I’d probably have dug the deepest hole I could in the sand and pulled it in on top of me, but I still thought we were close enough to our own lines to find refuge with little difficulty. So I braced myself as Jurgen kicked our ramshackle vehicle into gear, and with a roar and a bounce, which seemed to loosen the fillings in my teeth, we rattled off to meet our destiny.



EIGHT

The rest of the day passed without incident, despite my natural apprehension at the prospect of attracting attention from any enemies in the immediate vicinity. (Not to mention our own forces. If a Guard or PDF unit noticed us before we noticed them, given our mode of transport, they could hardly be blamed for opening fire before we got close enough to identify ourselves as friends.) My fears in this regard were far from unfounded, as any unseen lurkers would have had more than adequate warning of our approach: the roar of our engine echoed from the dunes surrounding us loudly enough to blot out almost any other sound from my ringing ears, and I blessed the foresight which had impelled me to pass one of the comm-beads to Jorgen before we set off. Without them, conversation between us would have been impossible.

Not that it was exactly easy even then. We progressed in a series of spine jarring jolts, each one of which drove the breath from my lungs, so that whatever remarks we did manage to exchange were generally interrupted by staccato hesitations every other word. After a while, I discovered that the discomfort was marginally less if I stood at the bolter, or to be more accurate clung on to the thing for dear life, letting my knees flex with the bouncing of our sturdy little vehicle, and that this allowed me a better view of our surroundings. Using an amplivisor would have been impossible under the circumstances, so I had to make do with what I could see with my own unaided eyes, and I have to admit that this wasn't a lot.

This wasn't to say that the landscape was unvaryingly monotonous, however. Occasional outcrops of reddish-brown rocks broke through the sand, like reefs in an ocean of dust, and thin patches of desiccated scrub clung grimly to whatever crevices they could find. Lichens, too, speckled

their surfaces, in an astonishing profusion of colours, although perhaps the eye simply picked them out more easily because of the contrast they made with their surroundings. Of animal life I saw no obvious sign, although I have no doubt that it was there. If there's one thing I've learned on my travels around the galaxy it's that life is incredibly tenacious, and will manage to find a way of getting by even in the most inimical of environments.

At length, with the shadows beginning to stretch and the sky becoming tinged with purple, I decided to call a halt. Jurgen complied with alacrity, which was hardly surprising given that he'd been wrestling those cumbersome controls for most of the afternoon, and coasted us to a halt in the lee of one of the outcrops of rock. I jumped down gratefully, almost stumbling as the sand gave way beneath my boots, and tried to stretch some feeling back into my cramped and knotted limbs.

'How far do you think we've come?' I asked, reaching for the nearest bundle of survival rations and heaving it onto the ground beside me.

Jurgen shrugged. 'About eighty klom,'⁴³ he said, beginning to set up the stove.

I raised an eyebrow, surprised. 'That far?' I asked, trying not to sound sceptical. Jurgen nodded, taking the rhetorical question as literally as he tended to take everything else.

'That's pretty fast given the conditions, and the way the buggy's loaded down,' he said. I couldn't argue with that, so I left him to set up camp and wandered up the side of the outcrop, searching for some firmer footing where I could try and work some flexibility back into my limbs with a little chainsword practice now that the air was cool enough to make physical exercise feasible again. Fortunately, I found it, and by the time I'd finished running through the familiar routines of attack and defence, I was beginning to feel a great deal calmer and more comfortable.

I returned to the campsite in a mood I can only describe as mellow, to find that Jurgen had been busy in my absence. Darkness was falling in earnest, bringing with it the night time chill, and I retrieved my greatcoat from the buggy. After a hot meal and a mug of recaf, I retreated to the survival bubble he'd erected, rolled myself up in the sleeping bag I found there, and drifted off into the last night of untroubled slumber I was to enjoy for some weeks to come.

Not that the following morning gave us any presentiment of what was in store. I woke to find Jurgen already abroad, stirring something grey and lumpy in a pan on the portable stove, which, despite its appearance, smelled surprisingly appetising. He glanced up as I stepped carefully over his bedroll, which he'd laid down just outside the bubble, and handed me a mug of recaf.

'Almost ready, sir,' he assured me, and went back to tending his porridge. Emperor alone knows what was in it, but it was packed with enough nutrients to leave me feeling ready for anything (which I suppose is ironic, considering how the day was to turn out). I began whistling cheerfully as I started the job of breaking camp. After I'd stowed some of the equipment and carried a couple of bundles back to the buggy, my aide's silently reproachful look finally succeeded in reminding me that this was supposed to be his department, and I decided I'd better let him get on with it without any further interference. Jurgen was, if nothing else, a stickler for protocol, which normally made my life considerably easier than it otherwise might have been. In the years to come even generals were to find themselves politely but firmly fobbed off when I couldn't be bothered to deal with them.

Knowing that to persist in what he undoubtedly regarded as a menial task far beneath my dignity as a commissar would leave him disgruntled for the rest of the day, I returned to the outcrop I'd climbed the evening before with an amplivisor, and scanned the horizon, hoping to gather some clue as to our whereabouts. From my elevated position, I found I could see a great deal further than I'd expected in the clear desert air, and my attention was drawn to a faint smudge on the horizon, roughly in our direction of travel (which, naturally enough, had been the first way I'd looked). My curiosity piqued, I magnified the image as much as I could and tried to make out a few more details.

'I think we're approaching a town,' I told Jurgen, the faint rattles and bangs being picked up by his comm-bead telling me he was stowing our equipment in the buggy with his usual efficiency. I tried to bring the image into clearer focus, but the heat haze was already beginning to shimmer over the sands, and it was hard to make anything out other than the vague outline of walls and buildings. Try as I might, I was unable to resolve any details of the inhabitants, if indeed there were any. 'It could be the splodge on the map we've been heading for.'

‘That sounds likely,’ my aide agreed. ‘Orks would mark one of our towns down as lots of enemies all right.’ He hesitated, and then went on, a note of caution in his voice. ‘Mind you, sir, they’d think that even if it was only civilians there.’

‘I see.’ I lowered the vision enhancers thoughtfully. That hadn’t occurred to me before, and the idea of trotting blithely into an ork infested killing ground (which is what any urban area is to an infantry soldier, and don’t let anyone ever try to tell you otherwise), was far from appealing. Nevertheless, I couldn’t see any other alternative. We certainly couldn’t continue to drive aimlessly around the desert until our supplies ran out. ‘We’d best proceed with caution then.’

‘Very good, sir,’ my aide agreed, barely able to keep a note of relief from his voice. A moment later the roar of our badly tuned engine shattered the stillness of the desert. ‘Don’t want to attract too much attention, do we?’

With that in mind, we approached the town at little more than walking pace, having discovered that the engine was marginally quieter at lower speeds, keeping the ever-present dune fields between us and it for as long as possible to muffle the sound even further. Eventually, we crossed the line of a road, the smooth rockcrete arrowing away from the town towards Emperor knew where, and turned along it. From this point on stealth would be out of the question in any case, and our best bet was simply to make the best time we could into the relative shelter of the outskirts. Assuming no one was waiting in ambush for anyone foolish enough to use the highway, of course...

A quick glance was enough to reassure me that the possibility was remote. Judging by the thin film of wind-drifted sand covering the smooth, grey surface nothing had moved along it in a long time, certainly not for several days, and that meant that any defenders would be unlikely to be directing their attention towards it. That didn’t mean the carriageway hadn’t been mined, of course, but I was pretty sure Jurgen would notice any telltale irregularities in the road surface and react accordingly, so I tried not to think about that.

‘I’ve got a bad feeling about this,’ I told him, sweeping the amplivisor across the line of walls, which made up the boundary of the town. On the smooth surface of the highway the ride was much steadier, and I was able keep them trained on the vista ahead with no more effort than if we’d been

scooting along in our faithful old Salamander. Signs of fighting were everywhere, none of the structures I could see having been left undamaged, and several had collapsed entirely. The streets ahead were choked with fallen debris, although to my relief none of it seemed to have been rearranged to form barricades or weapon emplacements.

‘Looks bad,’ Jurgen agreed, slowing to skirt a couple of burnt-out groundcars, which had evidently been hit by heavy weapons of some kind. They looked like civilian models, the thin sheet metal of their bodywork ripped open like ration packs, and I tried not to look too closely at their contents. Whoever the occupants had been they’d piled in regardless of the cars’ nominal carrying capacities, their charred bones tumbled together in death, so thoroughly entangled it would take a genetor magos to tell which bodies they’d originally come from. And the chances of that were negligible; whoever these people were, only the Emperor knew, and probably only He cared. ‘Refugees, if you ask me.’

‘Seems likely,’ I agreed, dismissing the matter from my mind. Whether any of their fellows had made it to safety, shared their fate, or simply fled to perish in the desert, there was no way of telling. All I could infer with any certainty was that the orks had indeed been here, although whether they were still around or had moved on in search of more to defile and destroy I couldn’t be certain. The only prudent course of action was to assume that they were still infesting the area, and I instructed Jurgen to proceed with caution. ‘Find somewhere we can park this thing out of sight, and let’s move in on foot. I want to know what we’re getting into.’ The palms of my hands were tingling again, and I trusted my subconscious enough to take notice of the presentiment of danger.

‘Very good, commissar.’ My aide complied with his usual speed and efficiency, coasting us to a halt in the remains of a nearby fabricator unit. What had once been produced here I couldn’t tell, the crushed and mangled machinery all around us being half-buried by what remained of the roof, but I nodded approval of his choice. The thick slabs of metal surrounding us would provide excellent cover if we had to conduct a fighting retreat. It would disrupt the outline of our vehicle on any auspex screen (assuming the greenskins had the brains to use such a thing of course⁴⁴), and provide enough concealment for us to make our way deeper into the derelict settlement without attracting any attention... I hoped. I strained my ringing ears as Jurgen killed the engine, but heard nothing beyond the thudding of

my heart and the faint ticks of the cooling mechanism.

‘Better let me go first, sir.’ Jurgen unslung his lasgun and scurried to the nearest patch of daylight, squinting slightly as he crouched low and took aim at the street outside. After a moment, he raised a hand to indicate that the coast was clear. ‘No sign of life.’

‘Good,’ I said, with rather more emphasis than I’d intended, and scrambled down from my position at the heavy bolter. I felt a little unsteady on my feet for a moment or two, no doubt as a result of the sudden cessation of the lurching motion I’d grown used to, but by the time I’d crossed the floor to join him the momentary flash of vertigo had faded away as swiftly as it had come. I drew my laspistol and chainsword as I trotted forwards, feeling instantly calmer for having weapons in my hands again, and crouched down next to Jurgen, trying not to breathe too deeply through my nose.

Outside, the midmorning sun struck hard from the face of the building opposite, another industrial structure, which had once housed a power plant of some kind judging by the tendrils of piping emanating from it in all directions. Now, it was a roofless ruin, evidently the result of a massive explosion within; a contingency the architect had obviously allowed for if the metre-thick walls were anything to go by. Even so, the facade had cracked, slumping wearily in several places, and the doors and windows were shattered, lying in pieces across the boulevard, which separated the two structures. I assumed that the power plant itself had gone up, probably as a result of the attendant tech-priests being killed or forced to abandon their posts, as there was relatively little sign of combat damage to be seen.

The consequences had been severe for everything else in the vicinity, however, including the building we had taken refuge in, the rent in the wall through which we were able to observe all this clearly the result of flying debris from the explosion.

‘That made a mess,’ my aide commented superfluously. I nodded.

‘Let’s hope it took most of the greenies with it.’

‘As the Emperor wills,’ Jurgen agreed, a phrase he tended to trot out as the verbal equivalent of a shrug. Keeping close to the line of the building, we slipped through the hole, and began to move cautiously deeper into the ruined town.

At first, we saw no signs of life, although there was plenty of evidence of its opposite, and I began to hope that I was right after all and the greenskins

had abandoned the place.

Bodies lay everywhere, humans mostly, all ages and both sexes, apparently gunned down or hacked to pieces as they tried to flee. The enemy hadn't had it all their own way, though; there were greenskin corpses lying around too, massively muscled brutes like the ones we'd fought off in the desert and a few scrawnier specimens roughly the size of their human victims.

'This happened some time ago,' I concluded, pausing to examine the corpse of a local arbitrator⁴⁵ who had apparently died trying to defend a group of civilians. His weapon had gone, of course, looted by the greenie that had killed him, but it had evidently been some sort of high calibre autopistol judging by the wounds it had left in a nearby gretchin⁴⁶. The corpse, like all the others, had become desiccated by the merciless sun, mummified by the constant arid heat, which meant it had been there for some time. Jurgen nodded, staring at the greenskin cadavers, and clearly wishing he had a can of promethium to hand.

'Looks that way,' he agreed.

If anything, the prospect grew even worse as we penetrated deeper into that blighted town, which, ironically, we came to realise from the municipal signage and the business premises we passed, had rejoiced in the name of Prosperity Wells. Everywhere we looked, we saw signs of the savagery of the invaders, death and destruction wrought purely for its own sake, and despite my usual pragmatic temperament, I began to feel angry at the sheer wantonness of it all. What Jurgen felt I can only imagine, and for the first time I began to understand the depth of the hatred the Valhallans felt for these creatures. To see a peaceful community despoiled in this way was hard enough; to know that such things had been done to your home world, even generations ago, would be an intolerable affront.

By this time, Jurgen and I had separated by perhaps a score of metres, taking it in turns to cover one another while we moved from one patch of concealment to the next, relying on the comm-beads to keep us in touch; although, from habit, we continued to supplement the vox-link with hand gestures, keeping transmissions to a minimum. I was just about to leave the shelter of a shop doorway, an apothecary's if I remember right, when he held up a hand to forestall me and slipped into the shadow of a refuse bin.

'Hostiles,' he voxed, readying his weapon. I steadied the laspistol against my other arm, crouching low, and taking aim along the street. I didn't have to wait long for a target. A moment later a mob of gretchin ambled into

view, chattering and screeching among themselves in their barbarous tongue, pushing a large handcart. A single ork was with them, clearly in charge, urging them along with inchoate bellows and frequent blows, which the smaller greenskins generally ignored in favour of squabbling among themselves. The cart was loaded with corpses, and remembering the grisly snack I'd discovered in the locker of the buggy we'd acquired, I had a horrible suspicion as to their eventual destination.

'Hold fire,' I replied, as quietly as I could. In the distance, my aide nodded grimly. Tempting as the target was, and consumed as we both undoubtedly were with the righteous anger all subjects of the Emperor would have felt at that moment, there was no point in drawing attention to ourselves by giving way to our emotions. The faint wash of static in my comm-bead intensified for a moment.

'-ay again?' a tenuous voice enquired, and faded back into inaudibility. I glanced at Jurgen, prepared to repeat the instruction, but he was looking back in my direction, and even at this distance I could make out the expression of puzzlement on his face (which was no great trick, given how familiar I was with it).

'Commissar?' His voice sounded in my ear as clearly as if he were standing right next to me. I glanced back at the cavalcade of greenskins, but they were clearly still unaware of our presence, moving away now at as brisk a pace as their ork overseer could urge them to. I gestured him to silence.

'There's someone else on this frequency,' I told him, and boosted the gain as best I could. Fortunately, he had enough sense to keep quiet after that, and just nodded an acknowledgement before returning his attention to the retreating greenies. I listened hard, trying to make out another voice through the hissing in my earpiece. 'Unidentified contact, respond.'

'-ergeant Tayber, Bravo squa-' filtered through the static. '-who the -ing warp -ou?'

'Commissar Cain, serving with the 12th Valhallan field artillery,' I said. 'What's your position?'

'-ing desperate.'

The greenskins were out of sight by this time, and Jurgen was moving back to join me. Even broken up by static as it was, the voice took on an incredulous edge. '-id you ju -ay Comm -ar?'

'Yes. Where are you?' I repeated, unsure how much of what I was saying

was getting through. I was used to Imperial Guard vox nets, but this sounded like a PDF setup, which was liable to be far less sophisticated. For all I knew, we could have been practically on top of him.

‘South –ector, hydro –ation. Wha –eft of it.’

‘South sector hydro station,’ I confirmed. ‘We’ll find it.’

‘If the –nies don’t –nd you first,’ the voice added encouragingly. ‘–he whole tow– crawling with the –ing –ds.’

‘We’ll proceed with caution,’ I assured him as my aide returned to my side, and cut the link.

This didn’t sound promising. Whoever this Sergeant Tayber was, it seemed he was halfway across this ork-infested killing zone, and joining him would entail a significant risk. Probably the safest thing to do would be to head back to the buggy and resume our journey as best we could. On the other hand, he was the first Imperial soldier we’d been able to contact since we’d landed on this Emperor-forsaken rock, and might know where the bulk of our forces were. All in all, it seemed my best chance of survival was to try to link up with him, and if some of his squad was still around too, so much the better. The more troopers I had standing between the orks and me the happier I’d feel.

‘South is that way,’ Jurgen said, looking up from the compass he’d extracted from somewhere in his collection of pouches, and pointing helpfully in the direction the foraging party of greenskins had just taken. I sighed deeply.

‘It would be,’ I said.



NINE

Despite my obvious apprehension, our journey through the heart of the devastated town passed without incident; which is to say that, to my vague surprise, Jorgen and I made it to the south sector without getting killed. There were a number of narrow squeaks, however. The closer we got to the centre of things, the more greenskins we saw, and other sights too, which even at this remove I'd rather not dwell on. Once we passed a shrine to the Emperor, shattered and desecrated, its offerings looted, now, judging by the stench, being used by the orks as a makeshift latrine.⁴⁷ Even that, vile as it had been, was eclipsed by our first sight of the main Administratum building in the centre of the town.

It had clearly once been an elegant and well-proportioned structure, facing a wide, paved square in which fountains had played and artfully sited colonnades had provided shade for the townspeople going about their business. Now it bore a garland of twisted corpses, hanging from windows and statues, no doubt the civic and spiritual leaders of the community judging by the number of Administratum and ecclesiarchy robes I could see. Few had died easily, that much was clear, despite the familiar desiccation of the cadavers.

Jorgen hawked and spat, and I nodded, my own feelings far beyond words. In later years I was to see just as bad, if not worse, on far too many occasions, but at that time I had yet to encounter the minions of the Dark Powers, the necrons, or the infinitely refined sadism of the Chaos-touched eldar, and perhaps for that reason the memories remain so strong. Right then I wanted nothing more than to exterminate every greenskin on the planet, with my bare hands if I had to, but my survival instinct reasserted itself before I could give way to the impulse to avenge these sorry victims

on the next of the creatures to cross our path.

There were plenty of them to be seen, large and small, scuttling around on incomprehensible errands of their own, most of which seemed to involve shouting very loudly or hitting one another. On a couple of occasions, we saw weapons drawn to resolve a quarrel, although none of the combatants seemed to take permanent harm from a mere axe wound or bullet hole, and most of the others in the vicinity simply ignored the fracas. Adding to the din was the perpetual roar of their ramshackle vehicles, which hurtled about the place with complete disregard for the safety of either their occupants or any pedestrians in their path. As well as the buggies and bike things we'd seen before, I was able to make out some larger vehicles which looked vaguely like heavily armoured trucks, and once something which might have been intended as a tank, but which looked like nothing so much as a daemon possessed pile of scrap metal rattled past,⁴⁸ crewed by whooping orks.

On several occasions, we saw foraging parties like the first we'd encountered, although not all were in search of fresh meat. Some of the carts were piled high with stuff only a tech-priest would recognise, while other groups seemed bent on collecting nothing but scrap metal. To my shock and surprise, in some cases what I'd assumed to be even scrawnier gretchin than usual, proved, on closer inspection through the amplivisor, to be human prisoners. I pointed out the haggard, shuffling figures to Jurgen with an inarticulate sound of revulsion, and he nodded grimly.

'They'll not last long,' he said, and I was forced to agree. Indeed, they must have possessed exceptional fortitude, or faith in the Emperor, to have survived their enslavement for as long as they had. No doubt the atrocity of the Administratum building had been intended to intimidate the survivors into acquiescence, and it looked from here as though it had succeeded in that aim.

'There's nothing we can do for them,' I said, moving a little deeper into the cover of a shattered wall. Trying to liberate the poor wretches would only get us killed, and none of them looked in any condition to make a run for it anyway. Nevertheless, it was in a sober mood that we continued our perilous journey.

At length, we hit a watercourse and took to it gratefully, wading waist high in the blessedly cool liquid. The sun was almost at its zenith, and the relief from the baking heat was more than welcome. I drew the line at drinking it,

however, continuing to use the canteen at my waist for that. No telling where it had come from, or what was contaminating it, especially with an army of greenskins in town. If you think that makes it remarkably foolish for us to go paddling in the stuff, you've clearly never experienced desert heat, or tried playing tag with orks, let alone both at the same time.

Despite moving as carefully as we could to avoid betraying our presence by sloshing around too loudly, we made good time. For most of its length, the aqueduct was lined with rockcrete walls, which rose higher than our heads, making it hard to see our surroundings, but by the same token giving us some welcome concealment from the greenskins surrounding us. Jurgen's compass told us we were moving in roughly the right direction still, and after a while, during which time the hubbub of the ork host going about their business had faded away again, I deemed the time was right to stick our heads up and see where we were.

Fortunately, at this point the walls of the aqueduct were sloping, and lined with pre-cast rockcrete slabs, which afforded excellent footing, so we were able to make our way to the top and lie completely concealed below ground level apart from our heads. I raised mine cautiously, seeing no sign of life, and scrambled up, Jurgen at my heels as always. While he dropped into a crouch, lasgun at the ready, I raised the amplivisor.

'We're here,' I said, picking out a sign on a nearby industrial unit informing me that it was the property of South Sector Plumbing Supplies. Like everywhere else we'd so far seen in this stricken community, the buildings bore the scars of fighting or ork vandalism, although there were fewer corpses in the street and more of the structures seemed to have roofs. I activated the comm-bead. 'Tayber, this is Cain. Respond.'

For a moment nothing happened, and I listened to the familiar hiss of static in my ears with tension winding inexorably at my gut. If this turned out to be a sump rat chase, and we'd come through all those orks for nothing...

'Wait one,' a voice said in my ear, surprisingly clearly. The channel must have remained open, though, because I was able to distinguish a muttering of voices, though not the words. A moment later the voice returned. 'He's on his way.'

'Good,' I said. 'And who are you?'

'Grenbow, sir, commissar, I mean. Sir. Vox specialist second class, sir, I mean commissar...'

'One or the other will do,' I said, hiding my irritation as best I could. PDF

without a doubt, probably never seen a scarlet sash in their lives before, and with only the haziest idea of what a commissar actually was. I suppose proper Guardsmen would have been too much to hope for, but if this Grenbow was typical of the locals it sounded as though I'd have been better off following my first impulse and just getting the hell out of Prosperity Wells while I'd had the chance. Oh well, too late to worry about that now, and at least it sounded as though Tayber had a few grunts with him I could hide behind. After all, if they were still on the loose this long after the orks had occupied the town, they must have something going for them. 'How many of you are there?'

'Seven effectives, two walking wounded.' A new voice came on to the vox, calmer, more resolute, and vaguely familiar; obviously whoever it was I'd spoken to before. 'Where are you?'

'We're outside a plumbing supplies warehouse on Oil drum Lane.' I'd been able to read the street sign quite clearly though the amplivisor. 'How do I reach your position?'

'You don't.' Tayber sounded about as trusting as Colonel Mostrue. 'For all I know you're a greenie collaborator with a scavenged vox. We'll come to you.'

'Frak that!' I said heatedly. 'If you think we're going to sit around here in the open waiting to be picked off...'

'Then find some cover.'

The vox went dead. Jorgen and I looked at one another. Clearly this Tayber was as cautious as I was. Despite the clear breach of protocol, I began to think I'd made the right choice after all, and if it turned out I hadn't, I could always shoot him for insubordination.

'Well you can hardly blame the man for being cautious,' I said, trying not to grin at my aide's outraged expression. I gestured towards the warehouse. 'We might as well wait in there.'

'Very good, sir.' Crouching low, behind a pallet of surprisingly undamaged ceramic sanitary units, we began making our way towards the refuge it offered. We were almost there when Jorgen hesitated, and raised his head. 'Can you hear that, sir?'

'Yes.' The sound drifted towards us on a light breeze, which struck pleasantly cool through the gently steaming fabric of my trousers. I nodded grimly at the unmistakable crack of las bolts, and the harsher bark of crude firearms. 'Gunfire.'

It seemed Sergeant Tayber wouldn't be joining us after all.

'What do we do now, sir?' Jurgen asked. I shook my head, regretfully. The way I saw it, prudent retreat would be the most sensible course of action, before the noise of the firefight attracted the attention of every greenskin within earshot. Hard luck on the gallant sergeant, of course, but there didn't seem anything I could do about that now. He'd just have to take his chances with the rest of his men.

'We get the frak out of here,' I said, an instant before the commode beside my head shattered into a thousand pieces. Three orks were charging towards us, blazing away with their crude bolt pistols, fortunately with the complete lack of accuracy common to their kind. That wouldn't be enough to keep us unscathed for long, though, so we returned fire with a will, taking the time to aim our own shots carefully. Time and again I've found that the fraction of a second it takes to make sure each las-bolt counts is worth more than all the wild firing in the galaxy. Of course, if you just blaze away in the general direction of the enemy you'll usually persuade him to keep his head down, unless you're dealing with greenskins, necrons, or Khornate loonies of course, but if he's got a cooler head than yours he'll be using that time to make sure he takes it off at the shoulders with his next squeeze of the trigger. Far better in my view to make sure you're the one taking the trouble to aim, and if he's doing the same, do it first.

Anyway, I remembered enough from our skirmish back at the crash site to go for a headshot, taking down the leader with a las-bolt to the cranium, while Jurgen did the same for his flankers. Remembering how hard they'd been to kill, I didn't take any chances, running forward as soon as they'd dropped to take what remained of their heads off with the chainsword. I didn't care how resilient they were; they weren't going to get back up after that.

'Right behind you, sir,' Jurgen assured me, his distinctive odour announcing the fact a second or so before his voice did. 'Which way?'

'Down there,' I said, gesturing in the opposite direction to the one our erstwhile assailants had appeared from. If there were any more of them, it was carrots to credits they'd be up that way too. Jurgen nodded, and checked the level of the powercell in his weapon. It seemed satisfactory, and he levelled it, while I took a quick look around. Sure enough, there was a flash of movement, just where I most dreaded it would be, and we started

moving, angling away from the approaching reinforcements, keeping our heads down and hoping the warehouse had a sufficiently large stock of commodes to conceal our progress.

No such luck, of course, although we were able to open up a reasonable lead before our pursuers noticed us. Glancing back, I noticed a dozen or so of the hulking creatures jogging forward with that same unexpected fluidity of movement I'd noticed before, expressions of belligerent curiosity on their faces, their heads and shoulders bobbing incongruously above the stacks of sanitary supplies. A couple of them surged forward abruptly, bellowing something incomprehensible in their barbarous tongue, and halted, beckoning the others to join them. Clearly, they'd just found the trio Jorgen and I had dispatched a few moments before.

'Time we were out of here,' I muttered to my aide, and he nodded, not bothering to reply. I indicated the warehouse, now only a few metres away. A blue painted metal door stood invitingly ajar, seemingly close enough to touch, but across an open space with no sign of cover. Going back the way we'd come wasn't an option, so we'd just have to chance it. A sudden increase in the volume of the ork bellowing behind us drew my eyes in that direction for a moment, just long enough to confirm my guess that a brawl had broken out over the possessions of the ones we'd just killed, and I nodded decisively. We weren't going to get a better chance, that much was certain. 'Now!' I said, in an urgent undertone.

'Right behind you, sir,' my faithful aide responded, and we sprinted for the sanctuary of the portal. We'd almost made it, when a concerted roar of '*Waaaagh!*' behind us, punctuated by a spattering of brick dust as a fusillade of badly aimed bolts and heavy slugs gouged their distinctive signatures out of the wall, made it abundantly clear that we'd been spotted.

'Inside!' I suited the action to the word, wondering an instant too late if there were greenskins already inside the building and whether it might have been more prudent to send Jorgen in first, but to my relief the place seemed deserted. A moment later, my aide joined me and we pushed the door closed behind us with a squeal of rusted metal. Clearly it had been hanging ajar ever since the orks had first attacked the town, left unsecured in the general panic, and for a horrified moment I wondered if it had corroded too badly to close. The surge of adrenaline I felt at the thought proved more than enough to overcome any residual resistance, however, and it thudded into place not a moment too soon.

‘That won’t hold them for long, sir,’ Jurgen said helpfully, smacking home a couple of reassuringly solid-looking bolts. A moment later, the steel door shivered on its hinges as our pursuers caught up with it, presumably without bothering to slow down first. As usual, Jurgen sounded surprisingly unconcerned, seemingly convinced I had matters well under control, and I found his phlegmatism strangely reassuring.

‘Let’s hope it doesn’t have to,’ I said, and activated the comm-bead again. ‘Tayber, what’s your position?’

‘Reamed,’ he responded almost at once. ‘We’re pinned down and surrounded. How about you?’

‘Likewise.’ I flinched reflexively as a crude grenade, resembling nothing so much as a ration tin stuck to a length of piping, sailed through a nearby window and rolled under a shelving unit of what looked like air conditioners. Jurgen and I just had time to dive for cover behind a reassuringly solid pallet full of boilers before it detonated, spraying the room with shrapnel which ricocheted off the metal cylinders with a rattle like a Galavan⁴⁹ rainstorm. ‘Do you have a plan?’

‘Take as many of the grox-reamers with us as we can.’ The vox went dead, with a suddenness which would have left me fearing for Grenbow’s safety if I’d had any concern to spare from worrying about mine. Either way, it didn’t sound like much of a plan to me.

‘Are you all right sir?’ Jurgen asked, rising cautiously to inspect the damage. I nodded.

‘For the moment,’ I said as casually as I could, trying to ignore the rhythmic thudding from the door. From the bursts of raucous laughter which accompanied each impact, I deduced that the orks were taking it in turns to run at the barrier, hoping to batter it down with their heads, an impression Jurgen confirmed a moment later after a cautious look through another nearby window.

‘Why don’t they just blow it down?’ he asked, honestly puzzled. I shrugged.

‘Frak knows,’ I said. The longer they kept the game up the better I liked it; it gave us a fighting chance of finding another way out of there. It was only as I began to understand more about what passed for the thought processes of these creatures that the incident began to make sense in retrospect. So far as they were concerned, we weren’t going anywhere, and given their tendency to impulsive behaviour and constant jockeying for social status it

was almost inevitable that trying to get at us would develop into another of their interminable competitions of strength and bravado.

‘They’re on this side too,’ Jurgen reported, somewhat superfluously, as the thudding began to be echoed from the direction of the truck-sized doorway giving access to the loading dock. It didn’t look as though there’d be much point in trying to get out that way either, I thought. Shame really, there was a lorry parked in the bay, which would have been a damn sight more comfortable than the ork boneshaker we’d commandeered. If we could have got it to run, that is; a dribble of lubricant ran from somewhere underneath it to vanish down a drainage hole in the corner of the floor.

‘Jurgen. Look for an inspection hatch.’ I pointed to the drain, which was only about a quarter of a metre across, far too small for either of us to fit. It seemed a pretty fair bet that it led to a sewer or something, though, and that wherever that was it would require periodic maintenance. Prosperity Wells was far too small to have accumulated a proper undercity over the centuries, but there was bound to be a tunnel system of some kind we could access.

Of course there wasn’t. Convenient drain covers leading to easily accessible escape routes may be abundant in the cheaper kind of escapist fiction, but if my experience over the years has been anything to go by, they’re depressingly rare in real life. (All right, I’ve found a few on occasion, but nowhere near as many as you’d expect given the number of times I’ve been stuck in situations like this.) A few moments of frantic searching was enough to convince me of the fact, and I was just beginning to think about firing up one of the torches I’d noticed on a nearby shelf in a futile attempt to burn through the grating over the too-small hole I’d found before, when a rather more practical notion occurred to me. I pointed to the truck.

‘See if you can get that thing started,’ I ordered, before grabbing an armful of the torches and running back towards the besieged rear entrance. To my relief, the door still held; although it was looking pretty battered now, and the bolts securing the hinges to the wall were beginning to work clear of the brickwork. Judging by the noise outside, the crowd of orks had grown too, considerably, but there was no time to worry about that either.

Fortunately, everything I needed was within easy reach, including the pallet of boilers we’d sheltered from the grenade explosion behind. I selected the nearest, and tipped the pile of brazing torches inside, pausing only to unscrew the nozzle and igniter unit from the last one; the gas inside

the little pressurised cylinder began to hiss out, and I dropped it on top of its fellows hastily, holding my breath as I screwed a metal cover snatched from a nearby shelf over the large hole in the top of the boiler intended for the main outlet pipe. Within seconds the thick metal vessel would be full of flammable vapour, or so I hoped. I stopped up the inlet pipe with the igniter unit, sealing the join with some mastic I'd grabbed on the way, and paused to inspect my handiwork. So far so good; now for the tricky part.

Praying fervently to the Emperor (who I was sure would be far too busy to be listening in any case) not to let me fumble now, I threaded a thin piece of wire through the trigger of the igniter unit and looped it round the handle of the door. As I stepped back, it shifted again on its frame, with a louder thud than hitherto, and a correspondingly loud chorus of approbation from the assembled greenskins outside. My heart skipped as the wire tightened, but my luck held, and the makeshift trigger didn't give enough to detonate the improvised booby trap. Mouth dry, I hurried back to Jurgen, hoping he'd made some progress in the interim.

'It doesn't look good, sir.' My aide shook his head glumly, and indicated the trickle of lubricant beneath the truck. 'The sump's cracked. That's a job for an enginseer, or a tech-priest.' I felt a thick cloud of despair begin to wind itself around me, as though my shroud was already reaching up out of the grave to claim me, as his words sunk in. So much for my brilliant plan, and the last slim chance I could think of to save my neck, and Jurgen's too, of course, probably. 'The engine'll seize up solid within a klom, two at the most.'

'You mean you can get it started anyway?' I asked, relief flooding through me again as he concluded his remarks. My aide looked even more baffled than usual, and nodded.

'For a few minutes, I think. But like I said, sir...'

'A few minutes is all it'll take,' I assured him, beginning to fling the rest of the torches, and anything else I could find which looked potentially flammable, explosive, or both, into the rear cargo compartment. In that respect at least we could hardly have chosen a better refuge; the warehouse was stuffed with such things. Once I'd collected a goodly assortment of solvents and pressurised gas cylinders I taped a small timer unit intended to control a central heating system to a domestic powercell, then added another igniter, and a bottle of cleaning fluid with a gratifyingly large flame logo in a yellow warning triangle helpfully labelled *Flammable: Toxic*:

Keep away from children and ogryns. No doubt a tech-priest would have been horrified at such a blatant misuse of the Omnissiah's bounty, and I had no confidence at all that it would work without being properly sanctified, but killing orks was the Emperor's work if anything was and I hoped he might cut us a bit of slack⁵⁰.

'Very good, sir.' The expression of bafflement never left Jurgen's face, but he fired up the engine nevertheless. It did indeed sound about as well tuned as our purloined buggy, but the revs built up into a howl of protesting metal with gratifying speed.

'Out of the cab.' I wedged the throttle open with a large canister of screws, and gestured to the bolts securing the garage doors against the ork horde outside. I'd set the timer for about two minutes, and hoped that would be enough. The crowning irony would be for us to be immolated by my own cunning plan. 'And undo those, quietly.'

True to form, my aide complied, though looking as confused as ever, sliding the metal rods back against their stoppers before looking back at me for further instructions.

'Get the frak out of the way!' I told him, pushing the truck into gear and jumping for it myself.

I have to admit, even after all this time, the memory of what happened next leaves me with a warm, happy glow. In short, it worked like a charm. As Jurgen dived to one side, the press of orks outside suddenly found the doors they'd been leaning against beginning to give. With another bone rattling yell of '*Waaaaaagh!*' they surged through the widening gap, just in time to meet the truck coming the other way. Engine screaming, the abused vehicle ploughed straight through the middle of them, scattering the lucky ones and flattening the others, who disappeared under its wheels with crunching and squishing noises, uncannily reminiscent of Jurgen eating a bowl of seafood. If any of them screamed, the sound was drowned by the enraged warcry of the rest, who turned as one to race after the fleeing vehicle, firing their weapons wildly as they went.

'Come on,' I called to Jurgen, running in their wake. As I'd hoped, the diversion had worked beautifully; every ork I could see was now chasing the empty lorry. I found myself hoping at least some of them would catch up with it before the timer reached the limit I'd set. 'This isn't going to be a healthy place to be in a moment or two.'

Well, I'd got that right. I led the way at an angle, away from the

warehouse, away from the truck and it's wildly yelling escort of greenskins, most of which were continuing to waste ammunition on it with a gratifying lack of success; if I'm honest, just in the general direction of away from there as quickly as possible. We'd just reached the perimeter fence, which a quick slash with my chainsword was sufficient to let us through, and were glancing around trying to decide which direction to take next, when the party of orks at the back door must have finally succeeded in gaining entry. A loud *whump!*, surprisingly flat I thought, although I suppose the walls of the warehouse kept most of the sound in, echoed across the flat space between the building and the large, ruined structure facing us. Slowly, with a cloud of dust rising around it like a shroud, the roof caved in.

'That'll teach 'em to go barging in without an invite,' Jurgen said, with clear satisfaction. The crowd of orks chasing the lorry just had time to mill around in confusion, glancing back and trying to work out what was going on, before that detonated too, spreading its load of burning solvents in a far wider circle than I'd anticipated. The roar of anger and pain intensified, many of the greenskins staggering around drunkenly, turned into briefly living torches, before slumping to the sunbaked rockcrete. Jurgen smiled, his mood turning even lighter. 'We won't need to take the promethium to that lot.'

A fierce elation took hold of me then, and I could hardly prevent myself from punching the air as though I'd just scored the winning goal in a scrumball match; only the reflection that Jurgen would consider such a gesture undignified, and take on the mien of a dyspeptic puppy (which he seemed to think signified longsuffering tolerance), held me back. It was just as well really, as any celebration of our victory would undoubtedly have proven somewhat premature.

'Oh nads,' I said, with considerable feeling. 'You have got to be frakking joking.' Another knot of greenskins was emerging from the ruin ahead of us, weapons at the ready, and as they began to sprint in our direction I heard that all-too-familiar warcry once again. I glanced around, looking for cover, and at that moment an ork rose from a drainage ditch in front of us and swung its oversized cleaver at my head.



TEN

How we'd missed the thing I'll never know, it was certainly big and nasty enough, but I suppose our attention had been almost exclusively focussed on the carnage we'd wrought in and around the warehouse. I parried its first attack instinctively with my chainsword, which, thank the Emperor, was still activated after carving our way through the wire mesh surrounding the compound. Sparks flew as I deflected the cumbersome weapon and turned aside, keeping the greenskin moving in the direction it had thought it had wanted to go until I'd inconsiderately got out of the way. As it straightened, disengaging its blade and trying to get back on balance, I struck backwards, slicing deep into its chest and eliciting a roar of anger and pain along with a spray of foul-smelling ichor. It staggered back a pace, trying to rally, and I shot it with the laspistol in my other hand. After my previous encounter with the things, I was by no means sanguine that even after taking so much damage it wouldn't simply rally and come at me again, but Jurgen was quick to follow my lead, shredding its torso with a burst of automatic fire from his lasgun.

For another instant, the greenskin seemed to sway, an almost comical expression of surprise beginning to curdle on its face, and then it toppled backwards into the rockcrete channel it had so unexpectedly erupted from. I glanced down, half-expecting to see it scrabbling back up towards us again, but by the grace of the Emperor it lay still.

There was no time to savour our victory, as a dozen or so of its fellows continued to charge towards us. I dived for cover behind a large metal pipe, crowned with a valve of some kind, and began to take stock of our surroundings. A moment later, the familiar odour of unwashed socks informed me that Jurgen had taken cover too, and not a moment too soon,

as the fusillade of badly aimed small-arms fire I'd begun to associate with these creatures began to rattle and ping off our makeshift refuge.

'Where the hell did they come from?' I asked rhetorically, and Jurgen shrugged, switching his weapon back to single shot mode.

'That building over there,' he explained helpfully, beginning to pepper the onrushing horde with his usual commendable accuracy. He scored several hits, downing a couple of our would-be assailants, but just like the ones we'd encountered in the desert, most of the others simply shrugged off wounds which would have disabled a human instantly. At this range, my chances of doing any real damage with the laspistol were virtually nonexistent, although I joined in with alacrity, and at least had the satisfaction of seeing a couple of them stagger.⁵¹

I stared at the ruin Jurgen had indicated. It was huge, towering over most of the other buildings in the vicinity, and a positive forest of pipe work ran in and out of what remained of the structure. Well, that was good; it seemed the conduit we were hiding behind had connections all over the site, so at least we could remain under relatively solid cover while we were running away. The question was, in which direction? Going back the way we'd come wasn't an option; despite the havoc we'd wrought behind us, I was in no doubt that enough of the orks had survived to make attempting to leave in that direction problematic at best. Straight ahead was out too: apart from the greenskins charging at us, the rockcrete channel that my opponent had erupted from was too wide to jump, and there was no sign of a bridge. I didn't think that little detail would stop the greenskins, from what I'd seen of their musculature they could probably hop across it without breaking stride. Jumping down, hoping to use it for cover as we had the watercourse, would be suicide. It was only a couple of metres deep, but trapped down there we'd have been shot to pieces as soon as the greenskins arrived.

'This way,' I said, leading my aide along beside the pipe, which continued to ring and reverberate with the slugs and bolts knocking holes in the other side. By my reckoning, we only had seconds to move before the horde was upon us.

'Right behind you, sir,' Jurgen assured me, although my nose had already done the job for him, and we sprinted for a small rockcrete blockhouse into which the pipes we were following disappeared. If we could get behind that...

'Oh frak,' I said, as another greenskin appeared round the corner of the

structure. I dropped it with a single las-bolt, realising in that instant of incredulous relief that it was only a gretchin, but that meant that there was bound to be a whole swarm of them right behind their fellow. I was soon proved to be correct in that assumption, as what seemed at the time to be a positive tide of the little vermin, but in all probability was no more than a dozen or so, boiled around the corner of the blockhouse, squealing and waving firearms which seemed even more primitive than those wielded by their masters. Indeed, at least one exploded in its owner's hands as he attempted to use it. Nevertheless, Jurgen and I swung aside at once, seeking refuge deeper within the tangle of pipe work, which continued to surround us, and just in time too; another ill-aimed volley rattled off the metalwork as we did so.

'I think this is a dead end, sir,' Jurgen said, and with a thrill of bowel clenching horror I realised he was right. On either side of us, the sheltering pipes disappeared into the side of a large storage tank, easily five or six metres high. Climbing to safety wouldn't be an option in the time we had left either. By the time our pursuers reached the end of the narrow gap we'd so incautiously trapped ourselves in, we'd simply be making ourselves a better target.

'Go back,' I said decisively. At least if we tried to engage them just inside the mouth of the metal defile they could only come at us a few at a time, and we might be able to pick them off one by one. It was a slim enough chance, Emperor alone knew, but that was infinitely better than no chance at all. As I turned back, my mouth dry, a sick knot of terror wound itself tighter inside my gut. The deeper, guttural tones drowning out the squeals of the lesser greenskins told me that my earlier fears had been well founded, and that the mob of orks we'd seen before had crossed the drainage channel without any difficulty whatsoever.

Nevertheless, we had no other choice, and turned to face our destiny as best we could. For some reason, the last transmission I'd heard from Sergeant Tayber came back to me at that point: 'Take as many of the grox-reamers with us as we can.' Well it still didn't sound like much of a plan to me, but it would have to do to be going on with. My survival instinct hadn't let me down yet, and I just had to hope that it wouldn't do so today.

I raised my laspistol, taking aim as steadily as I could at the rectangle of sunlight ahead of us. Shadows moved beyond it, and we were abruptly plunged into eclipse as an ork filled the space. I just had time to register the

ridiculously large gun in its hand and the inevitable meat cleaver whirling above its head as my finger tightened on the trigger...

Abruptly, the ground shook, and my ears rang to a series of overlapping explosions. The ork disappeared, to be replaced by a cloud of eye-watering dust, which billowed around us for a moment. I shook my head, dazed, and my survival instinct kicked in even more strongly than before. I grabbed Jurgen by the arm.

‘Come on,’ I shouted, coughing as the dust irritated the back of my throat. ‘Move!’ The sound of sporadic gunfire forced itself past the ringing in my ears, the harsh bark of ork firearms, and the distinctive *crack* of ionising air, which could only be produced by Imperial lasguns. To his credit, my aide recovered what wits he had, almost at once, and needed no further urging.

We emerged from our refuge into a scene of carnage. Most of the greenskins were down, and in no state to continue the fight; in fact most of them were in no state to continue to live, being scattered around the landscape in a gratifying number of pieces. The few surviving gretchin had clearly had enough, heading for the horizon with as much speed as their stunted little legs could muster, which in all fairness was pretty fast. Only a handful of orks continued to hold their ground, too stupid or belligerent to flee themselves, pouring a hail of slugs and bolts into the surrounding metalwork, from which well-aimed las bolts continued to erupt in reply.

Even as we watched, another couple of orks went down, comprehensively shredded by a neatly executed crossfire, and that seemed to be enough. The remaining trio, all leaking copious amounts of their rancid blood, stared at one another in mutual shock as it finally penetrated their skulls that they were undoubtedly about to go the same way, unless they followed the gretchin. As one they turned, began to flee and then became aware that Jurgen and I were cutting them off from safety. With the inevitable yell of ‘*Waaaaagh!*’ they reacted like all their kind tend to do *in extremis*, lower their heads, and charge.

Needless to say, my immediate reaction was simply to get out of the way, let them go, and good riddance, but, unfortunately, that didn’t seem like a viable option. For one thing, Jurgen and I were hemmed in by the blasted pipes, with nowhere to go, and would probably have been trampled in the rush if we’d tried it. For another, there was no guarantee that the orks would simply keep going even if we were able to make room for them. From what I’d seen of the creatures already, it seemed all too likely that now they’d

been presented with another target their innate bloodlust would override the impulse to flee again, and they'd simply cut us down on the way past. There were our rescuers to consider too. The initial impression I made on them would have to consolidate the authority of my office.

As I try to impress on the young whelps in my charge these days, it isn't the scarlet sash and the fancy hat that makes you a commissar, it's the way you wear them. The troops you serve with are never going to like you, but if you can get them to respect you that can be almost as good. Remember, you're going to spend most of your career on a battlefield with them, and they've all got guns, so making them think you're a liability is never going to be a very good idea.

Almost without thinking, I stepped to the side, where I'd only have to take on one of the greenies, and lashed out with the chainsword.

'Oh no you don't!' I snarled, with the best impression of martial zeal I could summon up under the circumstances, and ducked under the arm carrying a grotesquely oversized stubber of some kind. Like its fellows, the ork I'd picked on carried a large, heavy axe in the other hand, and I had more sense than to engage it from the side it could swing the thing unhindered. Why none of them shot at us as they charged I had no idea at the time, but I've observed the same thing on innumerable occasions since. Once they get close enough to an enemy they show all the tactical sense of a Khornate cult, so carried away with the prospect of getting into close combat that they seem to forget all about the ranged weapons they're carrying. Anyhow, the only thing this greenie tried to do with his gun was stave my skull in, which I dodged easily, finding as I did so that he'd kindly left himself wide open for a strike to the torso. By luck rather than judgement, my chainblade bit deep, slicing clean through him, and he ran on a few paces before pitching to the ground, coming apart in the middle like a gently sautéed ambull steak.

Jurgen engaged the one on the other flank doggedly, hosing it down with las bolts, his gun on full auto. I only caught a glimpse of the result, but it wasn't pretty, the luckless greenskin coming apart under the relentless hail of point-blank fire, almost as thoroughly as if it had been hit by a necron flyer. That left the one in the middle, which had barrelled on past me while I still had the other one standing between me and it. It lifted the cleaver in its hand, bellowing with rage, and bore down on Jurgen. My aide switched his aim smoothly, hitting it in the chest with a couple of bolts, and then the

lasgun went silent. We'd expended a lot of shots between us since leaving the buggy parked in the derelict factory that morning, and full auto will drain a powerpack faster than an ogryn with a beer glass.

Fortunately, I was still turning from the blow, which had bisected the first ork I'd encountered, and even more luckily the enraged greenskin slipped in the mess we'd made of its fellows. As it lost its footing, Jorgen moved with surprising speed, ramming the butt of his lasgun into its nose with an audible *snap!* It staggered backwards, still trying desperately to regain its balance, and I continued the sweeping motion of my gently humming chainblade, taking it behind the knee. It fell to the ground as its right leg came off, tried to rise with an air of stupefied astonishment, and I swiped its head clear off its shoulders with the backswing. The decapitated corpse swayed slightly, and tumbled to the bloodsoaked ground.

'Nice move,' I said to Jorgen, glancing around to see if there were any more greenskins in the vicinity. He shrugged, snapping a fresh powercell into his lasgun.

'They have a few vulnerable points,' he said. I nodded. Given the historic antipathy his people had for the greenskins, I supposed he would have been likely to know them. (In fact if I'd bothered to ask before, instead of dismissing the stories I'd heard aboard the *Hand of Vengeance* as pure exaggeration, I'd have found out that pretty much every Valhallan did.)

'You'll have to run me through them some time,' I said. (Which, of course, being Jorgen he took as an order rather than a pleasantry, presenting me the following day with a datafile detailing a number of ways to take out a greenskin in hand-to-hand combat; something I've had occasion to be grateful for on innumerable occasions in the years since.)

'Very good, sir.' He glanced around, levelling his recharged weapon. 'Was that the last of them?'

'I hope so,' I said. There didn't seem to be any more greenskins in the immediate vicinity, so after a moment I holstered the laspistol and switched off the chainsword, returning it to the scabbard. 'I suppose we ought to find out who to thank for this.' I indicated the chunks of scattered ork littering the rockcrete around us.

'That would be us.' A man emerged from the tangle of piping, his eyes concealed behind a pair of solarspecs which reflected Jorgen and me as large headed mannequins. He wore a vest of flak armour over dusty fatigues, although unlike my aide's khaki ones both were printed in an

urban camo pattern. Sergeant's stripes were visible on his sleeves, although the floppy sun hat he wore in place of a helmet, printed like the rest of his uniform in mottled grey, was devoid of insignia. He carried a standard issue lasgun, which he kept casually at rest, not quite pointing at us.

'Neat trick,' I said. The man nodded at the trio of dead orks at our feet.

'I could say the same.' He looked me up and down. 'I'm guessing you're Cain.'

'Unless you know of any other commissars running around the place,' I agreed. 'And you must be Tayber.'

'Guess I must.' He gestured, and a handful of other men began to emerge from the tangle of pipework. 'I see you found us after all.'

Of course. The ruin in front of us must be the hydro station. That would explain all the pipework I supposed. I shrugged, plastering my most insouciant grin on my face.

'It sounded as though you were busy,' I said. 'Under the circumstances it would have been rude to insist on an escort.' Tayber continued to stare at me, and I decided to seize the initiative. 'How's Grenbow? You were cut off pretty abruptly.'

'I'm fine, sir.' A young fellow, scarcely out of his teens if I was any judge, spoke up, a bulky vox-set still strapped to his back. It looked as though my guess had been right; it had stopped a round of some kind, but had undoubtedly saved the young trooper's life in the process.

'Pleased to hear it,' I said, and returned my attention to the sergeant. 'We should get moving. There were still some greenskins left back there.' I gestured in the direction of the column of smoke, billowing gently skyward from the point where we'd blown up the truck. Tayber nodded.

'We should. They know where we were hiding out now. Get the rest of your people together, and let's go.'

'We're it,' I said. I gestured towards my companion. 'This is my aide, Gunner Jorgen. Our troopship was hit when we entered the system, and our escape pod crashed in the desert a couple of days ago.'

'Sounds like a fascinating story.' Tayber turned and gestured to his men. 'Come on. We're moving out, although Emperor alone knows where to.'



Editorial Note:

Since, typically, Cain concentrates on his own experiences to the exclusion of anything else, the following extract may shed a little light on some of the preceding section. Alas, like so many other retired military men (and one woman in particular who springs to mind in this context), Sergeant Tayber's memoirs leave something to be desired in matters of style. Nevertheless, they remain perennially popular on his home world, as does Cain's own published autobiography To Serve the Emperor: A Commissar's Life. (Which, incidentally, is far less readable than the more candid private account of his activities; perhaps it's something about the idea of setting their experiences down for posterity, which induces a kind of mental constipation in warriors used to solving problems in a rather more straightforward fashion.)

From *The March of the Liberator: the Cain I Knew* by Alaric Tayber, 337 M41

It may be some small claim to fame, and certainly pales into insignificance compared to the uncounted thousands who owe their preservation to his inspirational leadership, but mine was the first life to be saved by Cain the Liberator, or, to be a little more accurate, the lives of myself and the remains of my squad.

Since the greenskin plague had descended on our home world, we had fought them to the best of our abilities, resorting to hit-and-run tactics, as their overwhelming numbers took their inevitable toll on our gallant defenders. In the previous chapter I set out how, separated from our rapidly

disintegrating command structure, we had gone to ground in the remains of the hydro station where Luskins had previously worked, using the tunnels connecting it to the rest of the town to launch guerilla raids on whatever targets we found. By some mischance, we must have betrayed the position of our makeshift citadel on one of these excursions, as we were attacked in our own base by a warband of some considerable size. Ironically, this was on the very day Commissar Cain had made contact with us, the first vox-signal we'd managed to receive in almost a month.

Had it not been for this fortuitous coincidence, we would undoubtedly have been caught without warning, and butchered in our lair. However, we had just set out to meet the commissar when the unmistakable sound of ork voices alerted us to the fact that our hiding place had been discovered. We engaged them at once, managing to hold them off, but I could tell that our position was hopeless. To make things even worse, or so it seemed at the time, Commissar Cain had also encountered some elements of the warband surrounding us and was trapped himself, massively outnumbered and facing certain death.

Had I known then what matchless depths of courage and resourcefulness the Liberator possessed I would have worried far less. By a brilliant stratagem, he succeeded not only in overcoming the foes surrounding him, but also in drawing off the bulk of the greenskins besieging us. Fearing, no doubt, from the noise of the carnage this peerless tactician had been able to wreak that they were facing a counterattack, the vast majority of them turned to meet this phantom foe, giving us the opportunity we needed to fight free. By great good fortune, the line of retreat chosen by the enemy took them through an area we had mined in anticipation of an attack from that direction, and for reasons we failed to understand at the time, they had halted right in the middle of the killing zone. One simple detonation sequence was all it took to reduce the bulk of the greenskins opposing us to a handful of stunned survivors.

It was then that we caught our first sight of Cain the Liberator, standing firm in the face of an ork charge, which would undoubtedly have given a lesser man pause. Undaunted, he ran forward to meet them, dispatching his assailants in a flurry of deft strikes and parries, his chainsword hewing greenskin bodies as casually as a woodsman's axe felling trees.

As he sheathed his weapon and strode out to greet us, a self-effacing smile on his face as though embarrassed to have been seen at work, I was struck

for the first time how young he was. We had no commissars in the PDF,⁵² so all I knew about them were the stories everyone knows, but I was soon to discover that in spite of his apparent youth his maturity and judgement were second to none. Indeed, his first question after we'd exchanged greetings was to enquire after the welfare of our vox-operator, who had been hit in the middle of our last exchange of messages, an early indication of the concern we were soon to discover that he felt for all those who had so fortuitously fallen under his care.

It was as we left our former refuge, however, that I first realised the truly inspirational nature of his leadership. To all intents and purposes we had been routed, forced on the run again, but to Commissar Cain this apparently crushing setback was nothing of the kind. Indeed, it was to be the beginning of a victory more complete than any of us could possibly have dreamed at the time.

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ELEVEN

Returning to where Jurgen and I had parked our purloined transport was to prove less of an ordeal than I'd anticipated. One of the PDF troopers turned out to have worked in the hydro plant before being conscripted, and knew the network of tunnels and sewers beneath the city well enough to guide us back without fear of running into any more of the greenskins. I hoped. It was becoming increasingly clear to me that brutal and impulsive as they were, the commonly held belief that they were also as thick as sump dregs wasn't exactly true. All right, the average greenskin is pretty stupid compared to a human (or even a ratling for that matter), but then abstract reasoning isn't exactly high on their list of priorities. Something had led them to Tayber's hiding place in the hydro station, and it wouldn't take much for them to realise that we'd taken to the tunnels beneath it. So, even though my old hiver's instincts welcomed the sense of enclosure around us, interpreting it as safe and familiar, my conscious mind was at least partially occupied, the whole time filtering the echoes around us for any sound of pursuit or ambush up ahead.

The further we got from the south sector, the more relaxed I became, and I was able to devote more of my attention to what Tayber was telling me. He and his men had been using these tunnels for some weeks, striking at isolated greenskin patrols and raiding for supplies, and that all in all they'd been making quite a nuisance of themselves. Well, bully for them, it was what they were supposed to be doing, and the more greenskins they took out the happier I was, but it became increasingly obvious to me the more detail he went into, that they were only staving off the inevitable.

'What else do you suggest we do?' Tayber asked once we'd got back to the ruined factory where we'd parked the buggy. He was looking around the

place, clearly wondering if it would do as another makeshift base from which to harass the greenskins. 'Just give up?'

'Of course not,' I said. He seemed convinced, now, that we weren't ork collaborators, which was something of an improvement, and was at least inclined to hear me out. How much of that was due to my commissarial authority, how much to my personal charm, which I was exerting as subtly as I could to reinforce the good impression hacking a couple of orks to bits in front of him had evidently made, and how much to the plateful of soylens viridiens he was scarfing down as we spoke, I couldn't be sure. If anything had convinced the PDF troopers of our good intentions it was the pile of survival rations we'd scavenged from the lifepod; it seemed they hadn't had a hot meal in days. 'They know you're out there now. Maybe it's time to move on.'

'Move on where?' Tayber asked, flinching a little as Jurgen leaned across to refill his mug of recaf, which hardly seemed fair to me; after a month or more of living rough he wasn't exactly fragrant either. I shrugged, forking another mouthful of reconstituted glop into my mouth.

'We're hoping to link up with the bulk of our forces,' I said. 'We know our regiment made it down in one piece, and it's our duty to rejoin it as quickly as possible.' So I could get back to sitting quietly, well behind the front line as usual, with nothing more dangerous to look out for than Colonel Mostrue's occasional attempts to see if I was quite as heroic as I was supposed to be, although I didn't think it was advisable to be quite that candid with Tayber. To my surprise he laughed out loud.

'Good luck,' he said. 'You're going to need it.' Something about the way he spoke started my palms tingling again, but I smiled as though we were just exchanging pleasantries.

'What do you mean?' I asked. By way of a reply he drew a map slate out of his pack and showed it to me.

'We're here,' he said, pointing, and to my well-concealed satisfaction I noticed that we were more or less in the position I'd estimated from the crudely scrawled ork map. I nodded, to show I understood. 'And the closest defending forces are here.' He scrolled the image across to the western continent, and tapped the narrow peninsular connecting the two landmasses. 'More or less,' he shrugged, 'apart from the odd group of stragglers like us, of course.'

'Of course,' I said, masking the way my stomach had suddenly seemed to

drop clear of my body with the practiced ease of the born dissembler. I shrugged too. 'It seems our tactical information was a little outdated.'

'You might say that,' Tayber agreed. I took another gulp of the recaf, wishing it was tanna.

My head reeled with the implications of this new information. Anyway I looked at it, my original plan looked like the only one with even the slightest chance of ensuring my survival. Remaining hundreds of kilometres behind enemy lines indefinitely was a slow way of committing suicide, nothing more. Sooner or later my luck was bound to run out.

'Nevertheless,' I said slowly, 'I'm going to try it. I have to. My duty to the regiment demands it, my duty to the Commissariat demands it, and besides,' I shrugged, with a faint grin at Jurgen, knowing only he would get the joke, and that I was further from joking about the matter than anyone else would think, 'the nearest mug of tanna is on the next continent somewhere. And I'm just about in the mood to go and get it.'

In the end, I persuaded Tayber to come with me far more easily than I'd expected. I'd been worried that I'd have to exert my commissarial authority, but he was bright enough to realise that the fracas in the south sector would have stirred up the greenskins to the point where sneaking around unnoticed would be far less easy than before. As for the troopers with him, I neither knew nor cared what they thought; once I got Tayber on side they'd follow orders like good little grunts and that was that. If I noticed any signs of reluctance to pull out on his part I simply put it down to the practical difficulties of our intended journey.

'We'll never make it all that way on foot,' Tayber said, shrinking the image to emphasise the point, until where we were and where we needed to get to could just fit onto the pictscreen together. Dusk was falling, which suited me fine; if we were going to sneak out of this firewasp's nest without the orks noticing, it would be far better to do it in the dark. I nodded, conceding the point, and Tayber shrugged, his face wanly illuminated by the tenuous glow of the mapslate.

'Then we'll have to get you some transport,' I said. There was no point even suggesting that they hitch a ride with us. The buggy was so stuffed with supplies from the lifepod, there was barely room for me to cling on to the thing, and even if we ditched them (which wasn't an option given how much ground we had to cover, especially with eight more mouths to feed⁵³),

there still wouldn't have been enough room for the whole squad to climb aboard it.

Tayber raised an eyebrow. 'And where do you suggest we get it?' he asked.

I indicated the scavenged vehicle with a tilt of the head.

'I'm sure the greenskins wouldn't miss another one of those,' I said. Once again I expected Tayber to argue, but to my surprise he simply nodded, with the first sign of enthusiasm I'd seen since we started this conversation.

'I know where we can get some,' he said.

In later years, I suppose, my innate paranoia would have kicked in at that point, but in those days I was far more naive, and so relieved at his ready acquiescence, it never occurred to me that he might have an ulterior motive.

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TWELVE

In the end, the plan we agreed on was simple enough, if more than a little desperate. Tayber and his men knew the town well, which was hardly surprising as most of them had grown up there, and had been keeping a commendably close eye on the greenskins' activities. Tayber called up a street plan on the mapslate, pointing out the local landmarks to Jorgen and me as we leaned over the tiny image. As ever, my innate sense of direction took over as soon as I looked at it, and I was pleased to be able to follow the route we'd taken that morning with little difficulty.

'They keep most of the vehicles here while they're not being used,' Tayber said. Recognising the common map symbol for an Adeptus Mechanicus shrine, I nodded. That made sense, although given the state of repair of our purloined buggy I found it hard to believe that regular maintenance was high on the owners' list of priorities. I said as much, and one of the other troopers, Hascom by name, chipped in diffidently.

'They go there for fuel, mostly,' he said. 'And it's where they build new ones.'

'New ones?' I echoed, and Hascom nodded.

'The greenies have some sort of tech-priests. They build things. Sort of...'

I nodded too, to show I was listening. I'd gathered from Jorgen that a few of the orks had a rudimentary knowledge of technical matters, but the news that the greenskins here were capable of producing new toys to replace the ones that got broken put another face on things entirely. I glanced at Tayber. 'I'd have thought you'd want to take this place out as quickly as possible,' I said. The sergeant looked uneasy.

'It's not quite as simple as that,' he said. I adopted an expression of polite enquiry, and once he realised I wasn't going to push him for details he

ended up telling me far more than he'd intended to of his own volition. (Which is a good example of why I try to instil a bit of patience into my cadets, although the little whippersnappers are generally too young and eager to see the point.) 'It's heavily guarded. We'd never have been able to get inside, and even if we did...' He hesitated, and I became aware of a subtle tensing among the troopers, like the first faint presentiment of a distant thunderstorm. 'We couldn't blow it up.'

'Why not?' I asked. 'If it's a refuelling station, there must be promethium tanks.' I glanced at Trooper Luskins, the tunnel rat, who carried a missile launcher over his shoulder, and his teammate Jodril, whose pouch of spare rockets was almost but not quite exhausted. 'In fact if you pick your spot, a krak round from outside the compound should do the job nicely.'

'It would,' Luskins agreed quickly, with the air of a man who had argued precisely this point himself on more than one occasion.

'But we'd end up killing our own people,' Grenbow put in. He was still lugging the useless vox-set around, although for the life of me I couldn't see why. Perhaps he was just so used to it that he simply didn't notice the weight any more.

Luskins shrugged. 'They're dead already. Just haven't stopped moving around yet.'

Grenbow and a couple of the others flushed angrily, and I stepped in to defuse the situation with the instinctive ease of long practice.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I don't quite see what you're getting at.'

Tayber sighed heavily. 'It's where they keep the prisoners,' he said. I thought of the emaciated wretches I'd seen that morning, and privately agreed with Luskins: none of them looked as though they were going to last much longer. Saying so wouldn't get us anywhere, though, so I nodded judiciously as though he had a point.

'We should take whatever precautions we can to protect the civilians,' I said, little dreaming of how that simple platitude was going to come back to haunt me. For the moment, though it had the desired effect, the air of tension around us draining away as swiftly as it had come. 'That goes without saying.' I turned back to the sergeant. 'But the objective has changed from the one you were considering before. We need to get in, obtain some transport, and get out again. How would you do that?'

'We'll need a diversion,' Tayber said. 'But coordinating it will be a problem. Once we split up we'll be out of touch.'

‘No we won’t,’ I assured him, tapping the comm-bead in my ear. ‘We’ve got enough of these to go round.’ The sergeant looked surprised for a moment.

‘Good,’ he said. He glanced at Jodril. ‘Got any frag shells left?’

‘One,’ the loader confirmed, ‘and two krak.’

‘Sounds like a diversion to me,’ I said, turning to the missile team. ‘Can you find a spot overlooking the compound?’

Luskins smiled lazily. ‘Know just the one,’ he said, to my complete lack of surprise.

‘Pleased to hear it,’ I told him. ‘Set up there, wait for our signal, and then drop the fragger on the biggest bunch of greenies you can find.’

‘Then head for the rendezvous,’ Sergeant Tayber said firmly, clearly worried at the prospect of Luskins’s enthusiasm for cooking off the promethium getting the better of him once we were inside. I nodded judiciously, as if I was considering it.

‘That might be best,’ I conceded, and spun the mapslate towards Luskins. ‘Where are you going to be?’

‘Here.’ He pointed, and I nodded again.

‘You can see the main gate from there?’

‘Clear as day,’ the rocketeer assured me, and his loader nodded a vigorous assent.

‘Then I suggest,’ I said to Tayber, in a tone of voice calculated to convey that the suggestion was nothing of the kind, ‘that they remain in place until we’re clear. In case we need covering from pursuit.’

‘That might be prudent,’ the sergeant agreed, with evident reluctance. I turned back to Luskins, masking my own apprehension at the thought I might just be giving a pyromaniac the biggest box of matches on the planet.

‘But don’t fire without a specific order from Sergeant Tayber or myself,’ I added, as if it were an afterthought. ‘Those rockets don’t grow on trees.’

‘No, sir.’ He nodded soberly, and broke into a grin. ‘Be good if they did, though, wouldn’t it?’

Once the troopers had dispersed to their prearranged positions, Jurgen and I had little to do but wait. Night had fallen in earnest, and with it had come the cold, so I fastened my greatcoat with a sense of profound relief. In the darkness, its sombre black was a positive advantage, and one I intended to exploit to the full in the hours to come. As always when waiting for the

action to begin, I found myself wondering if I was doing the right thing. Jurgen and I would be running a tremendous risk, and I was by no means sure how much I could rely on my new allies. Perhaps it would be most prudent to simply leave, and head westwards alone, hoping to slip past the orks unobserved.

No. That would be suicidal. My chances of travelling all that distance without backup were virtually nonexistent. If I was going to stand a reasonable chance of making it back to our lines, I'd have to take the troopers with me, which meant getting them some transport. That, in turn, meant I was committed to this ridiculous plan, which now I came to consider it carefully had more holes in it than Jurgen's socks... It was with some relief that I heard the comm-bead hiss in my ear, followed by Luskins's voice, which sounded breathy and excited.

'Team two. We're in place.'

'Good.' Instinctively, I kept my own voice under control. 'Await signal. Team one, advise.'

'Getting close,' Tayber said, and then went quiet again, maintaining vox discipline like the good NCO he was, at least by PDF standards. I took a deep breath and clambered aboard the buggy, where Jurgen was already waiting, swathed in a blanket.

'All right,' I said, as he fired up the engine and we jerked into motion. 'Let's see if this actually works.'

At first, everything seemed to be going well, Tayber voxing in shortly after we set off to advise us that he and the five troopers with him were waiting in the culvert that Luskins had pointed out would bring them close to the perimeter without exposing them to enemy fire; or, with any luck, sentries, assuming the greenskins were sufficiently organised to have posted some in the first place. It was a fairly safe assumption that they hadn't, at least not there, since the outflow from whatever arcane processes the engineers had overseen in the depths of their sanctum in happier times was blocked off by a metal grille, rendering entry from that direction impossible without the aid of explosives or other equally conspicuous methods. Explosives were in short supply, of course, and I wouldn't have been too happy in Tayber's shoes at the prospect of setting them off in a confined space in any case, but as usual my aide had proved equal to the challenge, producing a small cutting torch from among the plethora of miscellaneous items he'd

scavenged from the wreck of the lifepod.

That would still make a bit of noise, but if everything went according to plan, the greenskins would have a great deal more to worry about by the time the Perlians began burning their way through the barrier. Just so long as their attention wasn't focussed on us...

The journey to the former shrine of the tech-priests was nerve-wracking. I crouched behind the bundles of booty encrusting our ramshackle vehicle, hoping that would be sufficient to shield me from view. What little I could see of the night time streets was still more than enough, however, the same bustle of frenetic activity I'd noticed during the day continued unabated throughout the hours of darkness. Here and there, bonfires burned, illuminating the ghastly scene in tones of flickering orange, and once I saw a building ablaze, apparently set on fire purely for the light it afforded.⁵⁴ There were fewer vehicles around than before, and most of the ones we saw were heading in the same direction we were, so Tayber's intelligence looked as though it was accurate at least in that respect.

Once, to my horror, a gaggle of gretchin tried to scramble aboard, shrieking and babbling at Jurgen, which at least proved that his makeshift disguise was holding from a distance. Expecting trouble, as I was, my weapons were already drawn, and my thumb hovered over the activator of the chainsword. But before I could reveal my presence by starting it, Jurgen punched the nearest one hard and accurately, pitching it over the side, and laughed loudly. It had the desired effect, the other gretchin followed their fallen comrade, and broke into hysterical giggles themselves.

'What was that all about?' I asked quietly.

Jurgen shrugged. 'They wanted a lift. I said no.' A tinge of doubt began to creep into his voice. 'The little ones don't usually drive things.'

'Now you tell me,' I said, a tingle of apprehension beginning to make its way up my spine. If one of the orks noticed something out of the ordinary, we were done for. Too late to back out now, we were committed. I activated the comm-bead.

'Team two, stand by,' I said. 'On my mark...'

'Already loaded,' Luskins assured me. 'And I've a nice juicy target picked out.'

'I can see you now,' Jodril cut in. With the weapon already loaded and ready to fire, he was observing the scene through a spare amplivisor. Peering round the weapon mount and past my aide's shoulders, I could see

we were approaching a pair of wrought iron gates, incorporating the cogwheel sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus. It was standing ajar in a high, stone wall covered in images of the Omnissiah, which in turn had been largely obscured by vile ork daubs.

‘We’re going to have to cut this very fine,’ I warned Luskins. ‘Any second now...’

To my unspoken relief, he didn’t bother to reply, evidently concentrating on lining up his shot. Jurgen began to slow us down. A large ork, although in all honesty it was probably no bigger than any of the others, just seeming that way to my terrified mind, detached itself from the shadows surrounding the gate and ambled forwards, raising a ham-like fist for us to stop. Jurgen began to apply the brake. ‘Fire!’

A streak of flame scored the air above our heads, attracting the attention of every greenskin in the vicinity, and disappeared behind the wall. The guard approaching us turned his head with lightning speed to track it, reacting to the threat instinctively, and Jurgen accelerated again while he was momentarily distracted. The meaty sound of the impact as the greenskin disappeared beneath our wheels, making the vehicle shudder slightly, was swallowed up by the sound of an explosion inside the compound, which was followed almost at once by a cacophony of shouts and bellows.

‘Go!’ I shouted, for the simultaneous benefit of Tayber and Jurgen, and my aide gunned the engine, hurtling through the gates seconds before another sentry slammed them closed, leaping out of our way in the process, with a barrage of language I didn’t need to be fluent in orkish to understand.

‘Moving in,’ the sergeant acknowledged, and Jurgen swung the control yoke again, bringing us around to head towards a gaggle of vehicles parked by a large storage tank, which couldn’t be anything other than fuel. Another greenskin turned to watch us pass, its eyes widening with shock and recognition, and pointed a talon tipped finger in our direction.

‘*Humies!*’⁵⁵ it bellowed. Before it could do anything about its discovery, its head exploded, and Luskins cackled gleefully in my ear.

‘Don’t worry, commissar, we’ll keep the fleas off your back.’

‘Much obliged,’ I said, reflecting that at least if he was taking potshots with his lasgun, we were less likely to be immolated by accident, and rose to my feet. There was no point in attempting concealment any more, that much was obvious, so I swung the heavy bolter around and began blazing away at the largest concentration of greenskins I could find.

Just in time, too. No one could accuse them of being organised, but they reacted to the threat almost immediately, every single one of them grabbing a weapon and charging towards us as fast as they could. Fortunately, for the most part, they seemed to be as fixated on getting to grips with us in person as those we'd encountered before, and what return fire we took was sporadic at best, being easily deflected by the thick armour plating riveted to every surface of our vehicle. Even more fortunately, they were clustered so close together that missing them at this range was impossible; all I had to do was hold the trigger down and they fell in droves, most of the casualties being trampled in the rush as the ones behind surged forward to fill the gaps.

'Tayber,' I said, keeping my voice even with an effort. 'Where are you?' It shouldn't have taken this long to burn through the barrier in the culvert, surely. 'Are you through yet?'

'On our way,' the sergeant assured me, although the only casualties I could see being inflicted, apart from the damage I was doing myself, was the occasional greenskin going down to sniper fire from Luskins and Jodril. (Or in most cases shrugging it off, but at least staggering a bit and looking round in vague annoyance for the source of the threat.)

'Glad to hear it,' I said, with barely a trace of sarcasm.

Jurgen drew us to a halt with a jerk which almost cost me my grip on the weapon, and I watched him scramble aboard the nearest parked vehicle. It was one of the armoured truck things I'd seen in the street earlier, and looked more than large enough to carry the whole squad. 'Your taxi's waiting.' I disengaged the vox, and glanced at Jurgen. 'If you can get it started.'

'No problem, commissar,' he assured me, and a moment later the truck's engine roared into life, sounding even louder and more badly tuned than our own, if that were possible.

'Good.' I glanced round, finding the greenskins pressing us even more closely than ever. The heavy bolter ceased bucking under my hand, and with a '*Waaaaagh!*' I could hear even over the racket of the engines, they began to surge forward. I was out of ammunition.

'Tayber!' I yelled. 'It's now or never! What's keeping you?'

'We had something we needed to do,' the sergeant said. 'How many vehicles have you got started?'

'Just the one.' I dived for the nearest box of ammunition down by my feet,

and fumbled a clip into my hands. The greenskin horde was only metres away by now, and for some reason the image of the genestealer hybrids I'd faced on Keffia rose up in my mind. This was even worse, at least then I'd had thick walls to hide behind and allies I could rely on... I slammed the ammunition clip into the bolter with seconds to spare, and opened up again, driving the greenskins back a pace or two, but they were so close now I could make out individual features: a broken tusk, a scar, a missing eye patched with some brutish augmetic...

'We'll need several,' Tayber said. For a moment I failed to understand him, and then the coin dropped. Surely he hadn't...

'You've liberated the civilians, haven't you?' I asked, incredulous horror making my voice rise as I spoke. Overhearing the exchange, Jurgen vaulted into the next truck and fired it up too, then carried on repeating the process despite the number of bolts and bullets slicing the air around him and rattling from the vehicles' armour plate. An ork tried to seize my leg and I slashed down with the chainsword, taking his arm off and opening up his throat on the backswing. Despite my best efforts, the greenskins were under the range of the bolter now, and there was nothing else for it but to engage them hand to hand, at least for the second or two I had before they surely dragged me down and tore me limb from limb.

'You did say we should do everything we could to keep them safe,' Tayber reminded me, and I cursed every overly literal NCO in the galaxy, under my breath.

'Well, we could do with a little help here too,' I said, shooting another greenskin in the face with my laspistol. I was suddenly aware of a welcome presence, and surprisingly welcome odour, at my shoulder, and Jurgen began blazing away with his lasgun at point blank range. There was no longer any sense in trying to conserve ammunition. We'd either get out of here or we were dead anyway, so he hosed the greenies down on full auto without another thought of running dry, as he had the day before.

'We're on it,' Tayber assured me, and with a sudden surge of relief I saw the back of the crowd facing us ripple and turn, as a concerted volley of las-fire took them from behind. It wasn't just las bolts either, I realised with a start. Several of the orks fell, their torsos exploding into offal, surely the result of a bolter hit. As the line of figures behind them came more into focus, the reason became clear. Many of the prisoners had picked up the guns of the fallen greenskins, and were turning them on their captors with a

vengeful enthusiasm I could well understand. How they were even able to lift such clumsy weapons I couldn't say, let alone aim and fire them, debilitated as they were, but no doubt the chance to exact retribution for the privations and cruelty they'd suffered gave them sufficient strength.

That unexpected circumstance was enough to turn the tide. Taken completely by surprise, and probably concluding that they were facing a human army rather than an emaciated rabble with barely enough strength left to stand, the green tide broke at last. With howls of dismay, the orks turned and fled, displaying the same unity of purpose they had while united in bloodlust, leaving Tayber and me to stare at one another across a desolate expanse of feebly twitching ork bodies.

I gestured at the rumbling vehicles behind me. 'Mount them up,' I said, not trusting myself to add anything further, and Tayber nodded, shepherding his charges towards them with touching solicitude. I resumed my post at the bolter, expecting our foes to rally and counterattack at any moment, but to my relief they seemed to have had enough, at least for the time being. I tapped the comm-bead. 'Luskins, load a krak round.'

'Got one up the pipe already,' the rocketeer said, with undisguised glee, 'just to be on the safe side.' Jurgen scrambled back into the driving seat of our overloaded, and considerably battered, buggy. I was amazed that it could still run at all after the pounding it had taken, but we jerked into motion as easily as before, leading our ramshackle convoy towards the gates with all the speed Jurgen could squeeze out of it. A ragged cheer broke out behind us as the prisoners found themselves on the move too, and I cut in on all the comm-beads in the squad.

'Suppressing fire!' I ordered. 'Don't let them regroup or we're done for!' I emphasised the point by hosing down a group of greenskins who seemed to be readying some kind of missile launcher, which despite its cobbled together appearance, I had no doubt was capable of punching through our armour plate, seeing them fall in a welter of ichor and a tangle of shredded metal. By great good fortune, one of our bolts detonated the warhead they were loading as it exploded, extending the radius of the mayhem to a most satisfactory extent.

'We're on it,' Tayber assured me, and the troopers opened up with their lasguns, not bothering to aim, but relying on the blizzard of automatic fire they produced to keep the greenskins hopping. In all honesty, attempting to aim carefully from the back of one of those wildly bucking vehicles would

have been completely futile anyway. To my surprised relief, a few of the squaddies, or more likely the liberated prisoners, began popping off the heavy weapons mounted on the commandeered vehicles too, with a complete lack of anything approaching marksmanship, but making a fine mess of things, nevertheless.

‘The gate’s still closed,’ Jurgen reminded me, and I swung the bolter again, targeting the tangle of filigreed metal and the little clump of hysterical greenskins holding their ground in front of it.

‘No it’s not,’ I said, with some satisfaction, as the hail of explosive projectiles shredded the gates and the orks alike. Jurgen rammed us through the gap, bouncing over bodies and striking sparks from the thick steel plate protecting the front of the solid little vehicle, as the remains of the barrier skittered off into the night. He swung us out onto the street, still accelerating, and we barrelled away into the welcoming darkness, our engines howling like the damned as they echoed from the buildings all around us.

‘We’re clear of the compound,’ Tayber voxed, and I activated my comm-bead again.

‘Luskins,’ I said. ‘Blow the tanks.’

‘I thought you’d never ask.’ Another streak of fire erupted from the ruined mansion where our missile team was holed up, and disappeared inside the compound. A moment later, the entire world turned bright orange, and my ears were battered by a sound which went beyond the audible, to be felt as a physical blow. Our hurtling buggy shuddered and skipped for a moment, but Jurgen regained control with his usual air of imperturbability. Looking back, I saw a huge fireball erupting behind us, as though the molten core of the planet had got bored and decided to pop up for a look around.

The rocketeer’s voice took on an unmistakable edge of satisfaction. ‘That went well.’

‘Hascom,’ I said, ‘pull over and pick them up.’ Myself, I didn’t intend stopping for anything short of a visitation from the Emperor, and it wasn’t until the raging fire behind us had faded to a distant glow that I ordered Jurgen to pull over and wait for the rest of our convoy to catch up.

So far as I could see, we were worse off than ever – instead of a group of trained fighters to hide behind, I’d acquired a train of civilian liabilities that would undoubtedly bring every greenskin on the continent down on our heads. I might just as well have attached myself to a marching band. No

point letting any of that show on my face of course, not if I wanted to keep the troopers in line, so I sighed heavily, straightened my cap, and clambered down to the road with as much insouciance as I could manage.

‘Come on, Jurgen,’ I said. ‘Let’s go and meet our new guests.’

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Editorial Note:

Though he was hardly in a position to appreciate the fact at the time, Cain's actions in Prosperity Wells were to have repercussions more far-reaching than he could ever have imagined. Once again I've turned to Kallis's popular history of the war, since Tayber's own account of the incident inevitably concentrates on Cain's part in it almost as much as Cain does himself. It must be said, however, that where Kallis deals with the specifics of the action he is clearly somewhat wide of the mark; though no more than one might expect, given that he was working from the official version of events.

From Green Skins and Black Hearts: The Ork Invasion of Perlia by Hismyonie Kallis, 927 M41

If the war to reclaim Perlia could be said to have had a single turning point, it must surely have been the battle of Prosperity Wells. Much has been written of it since, by many of the surviving participants, so there is no need to examine the incident in exhaustive detail here; but the bare facts are still quite startling enough. Having survived the crash landing of his survival pod, Commissar Cain made his way out of the desert alone and unaided,⁵⁶ in itself a feat few men could accomplish.

However, if he hoped to find succour in that ironically named township, later to be rechristened Cainstead once a new community was established on the ashes of the old,⁵⁷ he was to be disappointed. The greenskins had made it their own, rampaging brutishly through that once peaceful haven in the desert sands, despoiling all that they touched and enslaving the few

demoralised survivors. Fortunately for them, and the future of the entire world, a few brave defenders still fought on, and the heroic commissar lost no time in enlisting their aid in an audacious plan to liberate the greenskins' victims.

Conflagration night, as that night became known, still celebrated throughout Perlia by the lighting of bonfires on the anniversary of that historic victory, took the ork scum completely by surprise. Caught in their lairs, they died in their thousands as their erstwhile captives rose up in rebellion, flocking to the banner of the man who led them: Cain the Liberator. Only after he was sure that everyone else was safe was he finally persuaded to disengage, the last of his gallant band to do so, pausing only to detonate the promethium tanks the greenskins relied on to keep their blasphemous parodies of the tech-priests' holy mysteries in operation. The resulting firestorm swept though the town, obliterating the ork host almost entirely, and showing up as a minor anomaly in the data recorded by the orbiting sensor nets.

At that point, of course, the Imperial High Command had no idea of the significance of the titanic explosion their analysts had noted, but it was enough to persuade them that something unusual was going on in the deserts of the east, and they began to look out for further signs of activity there. They were not to be kept waiting for long.



THIRTEEN

To my mingled surprise and relief, there was no sign of pursuit, the reasons for which became obvious after I'd slogged my way to the top of a sand dune and trained the amplivisor back the way we'd come. The explosion we'd touched off as a parting gift to the greenskins had only been the beginning. The blazing promethium gushing from the ruptured storage tanks had ignited everything flammable within reach, which in turn had spread to other caches of volatile substances, ammunition, and Emperor alone knew what else. Even at this distance, the faint concussion of secondary explosions as something else cooked off or burst into flame rumbled on like distant thunder, making me feel unaccountably nostalgic for the sights and sounds of the 12th's artillery park. Not the least of which would be a nice hot mug of tanna, I thought.

'They won't be coming after us tonight,' Tayber commented, appearing at my shoulder and raising his own amplivisor to check out the inferno in the distance.

I blew on my hands and rubbed them together, the desert chill striking hard even through the weave of my greatcoat, an ironic contrast to the conflagration in the distance.

'I hope not,' I agreed. 'But we'd better post sentries all the same.' Few of the civilians we'd picked up were in any condition to travel far, and I chafed at the delay that imposed on us. So far as I was concerned, the further away we got from the rapidly combusting town the better. Nevertheless, I masked my impatience with the ease of a practiced dissembler. If the worst came to the worst, I could always make a run for it while the greenskins picked off the easy targets. That reminded me, time to keep the good sergeant on my side. 'How are the refugees holding up?'

‘About as well as you might expect,’ Tayber hedged. ‘Better for some food, of course.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ I said. The first thing I’d done was organise a meal for everyone, or to be a little more accurate about it, got Jurgen to organise one, as it had occurred to me that our guests hadn’t been properly fed for weeks, and at least if they were kept occupied filling their faces they weren’t likely to wander off or otherwise get in the way. That in itself could be a problem, of course. The supplies we’d packed on the buggy might have lasted Jurgen and me for months on our own, and would have kept Bravo squad fed for a couple of weeks, but now we had almost a hundred extra mouths to feed, and that meant we were in deep trouble. ‘The problem’s going to be keeping them fed.’ I indicated the desert sand surrounding us. ‘This is hardly the terrain for living off the land.’

‘Not really,’ Tayber agreed, looking a little smug. ‘But there might be a couple of sandsiders⁵⁸ among the civilians. I’ll ask around.’

‘Good,’ I said, wresting the initiative back. ‘And while you’re at it, see what other skills you can find. Most of these poor devils could do with seeing a medicae, although I don’t suppose we’ll be that lucky.’ Tayber nodded once, briskly, and I carried on. ‘Our main priority, apart from supplies, is going to be transport and defence. See if anyone’s had any kind of combat training, or failing that been out hunting, anything like that, and arm them. Have a word with Jurgen about the spare lasguns we packed, and make up the numbers with the ork stuff if you have to. If it turns out we really do have enough warm bodies to mount a credible defence, split them into squads and put one of your troopers in charge of each. And we could really do with someone who knows how to keep these piles of junk running.’ I looked at the half dozen or so trucks and buggies we’d acquired, parked in a rough circle to form the best defence we could, and shook my head. ‘That really would be a miracle.’

‘Something the Ommissiah has been known to provide on occasion,’ a new voice said, and I turned my head slightly, noticing the young woman standing a few paces behind Tayber for the first time. Her features were pinched with starvation, like all the other poor wretches we’d saved, but her eyes were still lively and humorous in the flickering light from the burning town. It tinted her hair and complexion, which I was later to discover in daylight were both startlingly fair, a dull orange in colour, a hue which also patinated her stained and grubby robe and flashed from the cogwheel on a

chain around her neck. Even though we'd never met before, there was something vaguely familiar about her, and as she took a step closer, holding out a hand, I realised she bore more than a passing resemblance to the sergeant. 'Enginseer Felicia Tayber, at your service.'

'Tayber?' I enquired, raising an eyebrow at the sergeant as I took the hand the woman was proffering. It was cooler than I expected, calloused from the handling of tools, and as far as I could tell completely original. But then tech-priests didn't tend to go in for all that wholesale replacement of organs with augmetics stuff until they'd risen a great deal further up the hierarchy. Tayber looked mildly uncomfortable, although the ruddy light from the inferno in the distance meant I couldn't tell if he was blushing or not.

He coughed. 'My sister.'

'I see,' I said, beginning to suspect that his determination to save the civilians hadn't entirely been motivated by taking my orders too literally. I'd never be able to prove it, and I needed him if I was going to get back to the regiment in one piece, so I decided to let it go. I turned back to the woman. 'It seems we both have a lot to thank your brother for.'

'I'd say that remains to be seen,' she replied, a hint of a smile beginning to form on her face. 'I'll have to take a look at those things first.' She turned her head, taking in the nearest ones, and looked thoughtful for a moment. 'That truck with the yellow skull thing painted on, it's definitely got something wrong with its transmission.'

'You can tell that from here?' I asked, wondering if her eyes were augmetics; although they looked real enough. The few tech-priests I'd encountered up to that point (and most of the ones I've met since, come to that), liked their enhancements to be obvious rather than counterfeiting the natural organs they were replacing, apparently feeling that the less human they looked the closer they were getting to the Machine-God.

Felicia shook her head. 'I was riding in it. And my arse is still numb.' A mechadendrite emerged from a fold of her robe, and plucked one of the spare ration bars (which up until then I'd completely forgotten about), from my pocket. She grinned, unwrapping it with her natural hands, and began chewing the thing with relish.

'How long have we got until we move out?'

I shrugged, taken completely aback. 'Dawn, I suppose.' I glanced at Tayber, and he nodded confirmation.

'About six hours,' he said.

‘I’d better get started, then.’ Felicia waved cheerfully, and started down the dune in a cascade of fire-reddened sand. ‘There must be some tools around here somewhere.’

‘Ask Jurgen,’ I said. If anyone could find what she needed it would be him. I turned to Tayber. ‘Your sister,’ I said slowly. ‘She’s not exactly a typical tech-priest, is she?’

The sergeant looked vaguely embarrassed. ‘She likes tinkering with things. Always did, that’s how we knew she had a vocation. She used to spend all her free time at the Mechanicus shrine meditating on machine parts.’ His expression softened, recalling happier times, and I had to remind myself that the two of them were probably all that was left of their entire family. ‘We were so proud when she took holy orders. But she didn’t do well at the seminary.’

‘I find that hard to believe,’ I said. I’ve always been a good judge of character, perhaps because masking my own has made me so adept at reading others, and it had struck me that Felicia would throw herself wholeheartedly into whatever she undertook. That, it turned out, was the problem.

Tayber shook his head. ‘She never quite grasped the theological side of things, a bit of a handicap if you want to get on in the Mechanicus. So they told her she’d just have to settle for being an engineeer all her life.’

‘There are worse things to be than a good engineeer,’ I said. ‘The Guard would fall apart without them.’

‘I know.’ Tayber shook his head regretfully. ‘And she seems happy enough. It’s just a bit of a shame, that’s all.’

‘We all serve the Emperor the best we may,’ I quoted, as though I thought it was a profound insight rather than something I’d found inside a cracker once,⁵⁹ and Tayber nodded.

‘Then I guess I should start organising some militia squads,’ he said.

To my vague surprise, I was able to grab a few hours sleep after that, waking to discover that the orks had unaccountably failed to massacre the lot of us during the night, and that things were beginning to look a little more organised. Jurgen pushed a mug of recaf and a slice of salt grox in a bun into my hands, and I ate the hot snack gratefully. The sun was only just above the horizon, and the desert air still felt chill.

‘They’re waiting for you, sir,’ he informed me, as though I had the faintest

idea of what he was talking about, and I nodded, sipping the bitter drink, and warming my hands around the mug.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘Who? And why?’ Fortunately my aide had seen me through sufficient disorientated mornings, sometimes augmented by hangovers, to take my evident incomprehension in his stride. I accepted a second mug of recaf and tried to chase the cobwebs from the corners of my brain.

‘Sergeant Tayber,’ he elaborated. ‘He’s got a report about the defence arrangements. That tech-priest lady. She wants to talk to you about the vehicles. One of them’s had it, apparently, and she wants to strip it down for spares. And a couple of the civvies who think they might be useful and want to volunteer for stuff.’

‘I see,’ I said, marginally wiser than before. ‘And did any of them confide the nature of the stuff they wanted to volunteer for?’

Knowing Jurgen he would have been politely obstructive until they told him, and the fact that he hadn’t continued to be so was a fair indication that they could indeed be of use.

‘There’s a man called Ariott, thinks he might be able to help out on the medical side.’ My spirits rose. If true, that was good news indeed. ‘And a roadworker, Kolfax, spent a lot of time in the desert before the greenies arrived, says he knows a bit about the conditions out here.’

‘That could be useful,’ I agreed.

I straightened my cap, and brushed as much sand and macerated ork as I could from my greatcoat. ‘Let’s see what they have to say.’

It was, by and large, surprisingly constructive, although getting to meet them was harder than I’d anticipated. I made my way through the swirling crowd of refugees, who for the most part were beginning to stir, with a vague sense of unease. As I passed by, almost without exception, they turned to look, murmuring among themselves, an expression I can only describe as awestruck crossing their pinched and filthy faces. The smell, I’ll gloss over, other than to mention that for almost the first time since I’d met him, I had to glance over my shoulder to check if Jurgen was still there.

‘Commissar!’ A woman of indeterminate age, but probably relatively young given that she’d evidently been healthy enough to survive weeks of captivity by the orks, flung herself at my feet, almost tripping me with what would have been a perfect tackle on the scrumball pitch. ‘Emperor bless

you forever!’

‘Blessed be the name of the Emperor!’ a goodly proportion of the idiots chorused in response. I tried to detach her as gently as I could.

‘Thank you,’ I said, my jaw knotting with embarrassment. ‘That’s very kind. Bless you too.’ I shook her off at last, leaving her sitting on the sand in slack-jawed ecstasy.

‘A benediction,’ she said. A group of refugees a little less addled than the rest moved in to take care of her. I shook my head.

‘I’m just a soldier,’ I said. ‘If you want one of those you should find a priest.’ Luckily the convoy seemed mercifully light on Emperor-botherers, which was the first bright spot I’d been able to find in this whole sorry mess. Unfortunately, this apparent display of modesty was enough to precipitate a chorus of praise and approbation, which seemed to be drawing in every man and woman in the convoy with nothing better to do, which, of course, was just about all of them. In the end, to preserve my sanity, I just raised my hands for silence, more in hope than expectation, if I’m honest. To my surprise, the whole reeking rabble fell silent at once.

‘You do me too much honour,’ I said, wanting nothing more than to get away somewhere I could finish my recaf in peace and try to work out what to do next. ‘If there’s any credit to be given, it should be to your own PDF soldiers.’ Let them go and bother Tayber; all this was his fault anyway.

Unfortunately, as usual, the more I tried to play down my own part in the previous night’s events the more I consolidated them in the minds of my audience. (Something which I suppose I should have anticipated, having done so many times on purpose. I can only presume that fatigue was dulling my wits at the time.) A cheer went up, which I was only able to silence by raising my hand again. ‘I’ve got to go now, and do, um, military stuff,’ I said lamely. ‘Enjoy your breakfast.’ As I’d hoped, the prospect of food was enough to divert their attention away from me, and I made it to where Tayber and the others were waiting, in the lee of one of the trucks, without further incident.

‘Commissar.’ The sergeant saluted, more for the benefit of the civilians present than because protocol demanded it I suspect,⁶⁰ and I returned the salute crisply. It wouldn’t hurt to impress them with the seriousness of the situation, or try to look as though we knew how to deal with it.

‘Sergeant.’ I nodded too, just for good measure, and sat on a convenient crate. There were several scattered about, drawn into a rough circle, and

most of them were occupied. Either Jurgen had been his usual helpful self, arranging them in advance, or the little group had congregated there to make use of them. Tayber sat too, on a box of ration bars (which had already been opened judging by the way the civilians' jaws were working, and I resolved to keep a closer eye on that side of things. All right, they were starving, so they could hardly be blamed for snacking all the time, but things were crucial enough on the food front already, and there was no point in making it worse.) The only one still standing was Felicia, although she looked surprisingly relaxed. It was only after some time that I realised she was leaning back on the mechadendrite, using it as a makeshift seat, something I was to discover over the course of our association that she habitually did. It connected at the base of her spine, like a prehensile tail, so was ideally suited to the purpose.⁶¹ I nodded a greeting, and she grinned at me, clearly in her element after a night spent poking about in the innards of the ork machinery.

'Right,' I said. 'We don't have much time. Sooner or later the greenskin survivors are going to recover enough to pull out, or another group will pass by here on their way into the town. Either way we'll be frakked.'

'If there are any survivors...' a balding man in a tattered Administratum robe put in, and the other civilians nodded.

'There are always survivors,' I told him. 'And even if there aren't, you assume it. Complacency now will get everyone killed.' They all looked suitably chastened, and the Administratum drone nodded again.

'Very prudent,' he said. I glanced round at the other civilians in the group. One was dressed like an artisan, and just had to be Kolfax, while the other wore the tattered remains of a knitted jacket with well-worn leather patches on the elbows. Clearly, captivity among the orks hadn't had quite such a catastrophic effect on his wardrobe as everyone else's. Nevertheless, he exuded an air of dependability and general concern, so I marked him down as the medicae Ariott. Which left the question of whom, precisely, I was talking to. I glanced at Jurgen, raised an enquiring eyebrow, and my aide shrugged, clearly at as much of a loss as I was.

'I wasn't aware that we had any representatives of the Administratum with us,' I said smoothly.

Tayber looked faintly abashed. 'Sorry sir,' he said. 'I should have informed you. But it seemed best to let you sleep.'

'Very considerate,' I said. I turned back to the balding little man in the

tattered robe. 'As you've probably gathered,' I said, 'I'm Commissar Cain.'

To his credit, he actually smiled. 'I don't think there's anyone in the convoy who doesn't know that,' he said. 'I'm Scrivener Norbert. Your sergeant seemed to think I could help.'

'Did he?' I asked, allowing the faintest hint of scepticism to enter my voice. Norbert didn't seem to take offence though, which was another point in his favour, just stretching the smile a little wider.

'Whether I actually can has still to be determined.'

'Right.' I nodded, deferring the matter for the time being. 'First things first.' I looked at Tayber. 'Defence.'

'We've got eighteen bodies who know which end of a gun's the front. Three PDF troopers, five tribunes,⁶² and the rest just play with weapons as a hobby.' He frowned, and looked a little dubious. 'Or that's what they claim. At least a couple of them are gangers if you ask me.'

'Good if they are,' I said, to his evident surprise. 'At least they'll know how to fight dirty. How are you deploying them?'

'Three teams.' I nodded slightly at his choice of words. Under the circumstances calling them squads would be wildly optimistic. Even something as cohesive as 'team' would be stretching it a bit. If they could engage the enemy without shooting one another by mistake it'd be a miracle. 'I've put Hascom, Grenbow and Tarvil in charge of one each, with one of the liberated PDF troopers as their number two, for now.'

I nodded again. The trained soldiers would be the natural leaders of a new militia force, and once we'd got the rest up to scratch the members of Bravo squad could be reintegrated back into their own unit (where they'd fight a great deal more effectively). Encouraged, Tayber went on. 'We've distributed the lasguns as evenly as we can between the teams. The ones left without we're hoping can crew the heavy stuff on the vehicles.'

'Good idea,' I said. 'They did enough damage last night.' If we ran into any more patrols the extra punch might make all the difference.

I turned to Felicia. 'Are any of the weapons still usable?'

'Most of them.' She leaned back at what should have been an impossible angle, and shrugged. 'I'll take a closer look before we pull out.'

'Jurgen tells me you want to junk one of the buggies,' I said.

She nodded. 'Junk is right. Half the parts are badly worn. The rest might do for spares, though. Not that the greenies have anything like standardised systems, of course, but I can probably patch and tinker them into place.'

She looked positively eager at the prospect.

‘How long is that going to take?’ I asked.

Felicia shrugged again, seeming even more gravity defying than before. ‘I roped in a couple of artisans. They don’t know the proper prayers for dismantling a machine, but they can undo a bolt without me breathing down their necks and I don’t suppose the orky stuff’s exactly consecrated anyway. I’ll just do a quick blessing if I have to reuse any of it and hope for the best.’

‘So they’re taking it to pieces for you now?’ I asked. For the first time since we’d met, Felicia looked a little less than completely sure of herself.

‘It seemed the best thing to do,’ she said, a trifle defensively. ‘And you weren’t around to ask.’

‘You’re the expert,’ I said. ‘I’d just have told you to use your best judgement in any case.’ She nodded, seemingly relieved, and I swept my gaze around the rest of the little group. ‘And that goes for the rest of you too,’ I added. ‘Unless you’re faced with a decision which will affect our safety as a group, just get on with it.’ I was met by a row of nodding heads, which reminded me incongruously of a carnival float I’d once seen.

I returned my attention to the enginseer. ‘How much longer is it going to take?’

‘We’ll be ready to pull out when you are,’ Felicia assured me.

‘Good.’ I nodded myself. Damn, it seemed to be catching. ‘That’s defence and transport. What about supplies?’

‘Barely adequate,’ Norbert chipped in helpfully. He held up a data-slate. ‘I’ve spent most of the night taking an inventory of what we have with us. Barring a few items of personal property, I believe this is it.’ He leaned forward, proffering the slate, which after a moment I leaned forward to accept. I scanned the list, scrolling down the tiny screen. ‘At present rates of consumption, we have food for three days and water for two. I’ve taken the liberty of outlining some rationing measures which should double that comfortably, or treble it with some degree of difficulty.’ I skimmed through to his conclusions. He didn’t seem to have missed much.

‘This is extremely helpful,’ I said, trying to hide the wave of shock and horror, which rolled over me as I assimilated the figures on the little screen. Things were even worse than I’d imagined: if the orks didn’t get us, the desert would. Norbert looked appropriately grave.

‘The other thing we’re critically short of is fuel for the vehicles,’ he

pointed out. 'Predicting consumption is problematic, given the idiosyncratic design of the individual engines and the conditions prevailing in the desert, but I've tried to err on the side of caution. Assuming the worst case throughout, we can expect to travel no more than two hundred kilometres before running into problems.' A little knot of tension began to wind itself tighter inside my stomach: transmuting the roll I'd eaten into solid lead.

'Then we'll need to find more,' I said, trying to sound confident.

To my relief Tayber was nodding in agreement. 'There should be a supply cache that close,' he said.

'A what?' I asked, trying not to let the sudden flare of hope show in my voice. Apparently it hadn't, because Tayber's tone seemed completely businesslike.

'The PDF maintains a chain of hidden supply dumps all over the continent. Both continents, actually, but that's not important right now. So we'd have something to fight with in the event of an invasion.'

'Seems like a wise precaution under the circumstances,' I said, with barely a trace of irony.

Tayber seemed to take the remark at face value though.

'So long as the greenies haven't found it and looted it,' he agreed. Well that was a problem for later; at least I could deal with some of the more pressing ones now, or palm them off on someone else at any rate. I handed the data-slate back to Norbert.

'Since you've got such a sound grasp of the issue,' I said, 'consider yourself our supply officer.' I gestured to my aide. 'Jurgen will help you make whatever arrangements you feel necessary.' As an afterthought I glanced across at Ariott, who'd said nothing so far, just observing events with an air of mild, polite interest. 'You might as well start by seeing what *Medicae* Ariott requires.'

'*Medicae*?' The man's voice was as unassuming as his demeanour. 'I think there's been some mistake. I'm a veterinarian.'

'Well, you're the closest we've got,' I told him, masking my feelings with some difficulty. This was just getting better and better. 'If you can treat a grox and a nose vole a medium-sized human being shouldn't be that much of a challenge.' He grinned at that, and hopped off the crate he'd been sitting on.

'I suppose not,' he agreed, and went into a huddle with Norbert and Jurgen. After a few moments of discussion, they wandered away, followed

by Felicia who wanted to talk to the bureaucrat about fuel allocations, and I returned my attention to Tayber.

‘Right,’ I said. ‘How far are we from these supplies?’

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FOURTEEN

As it turned out, we had a choice of two potential destinations within the two hundred kilometre radius Norbert had specified. Tayber and I looked at the mapslate, comparing their relative positions, while Kolfax hovered around us, clearly uneasy about being in the loop at all. Well, he was the nearest we had to an expert in these conditions, so he'd just have to get used to it.

'This one's the nearest,' Tayber said, indicating a supply dump roughly due south of our present position. I stared at the slate, the palms of my hands tingling in that old, familiar fashion. Something felt wrong about it, apart, of course, from the fact that it would take us almost a hundred kilometres out of our way. (Well, my way at any rate; I still meant to get across the peninsular to the safety of the western continent as quickly as possible.) 'And most of it's on the main highway.'

'Which will probably be crawling with greenskins,' I pointed out, the reason for my disquiet suddenly forcing its way into my consciousness. Tayber nodded, conceding the point, but still prepared to argue his case.

'That's true of any route we take,' he said. I shook my head, becoming more and more convinced that my way was the right one. I indicated the other site, which was a good thirty kilometres further to travel, but more or less westward of where we currently were.

'This one's further away,' I agreed. 'But it's also more isolated. If we head for it instead we should avoid most of the greenskins.' I glanced at Kolfax. 'Isn't that right?'

'It is.' He was a small, wide man, evidently composed mostly of compacted muscle, or at least he had been before captivity among the orks had taken its toll. When he did speak, he was taciturn to the point of

rudeness, which might have explained why he'd spent so much time out in the desert. He indicated the map with a stubby thumb. 'There are back trails out here even a greenie'd think twice about taking.'

'Which you know, I presume,' I said. Kolfax nodded once.

'As well as anyone, which isn't much.'

'Then that's how we'll go,' I decided. 'You take the lead vehicle, with one of the militia teams.'

'Right.' Kolfax nodded again. Another thought struck me.

'I don't suppose you know how to find water out here?'

'Take it with you.' Kolfax permitted himself a momentary smirk at his own witticism. 'You'll not find a lot otherwise.'

'Well we'd better hope we find what there is,' I said. 'Or we're going to have a lot of thirsty people on our hands.' Kolfax nodded, his demeanour sobering again.

'We might get lucky,' he conceded. 'If the rains have been good in the mountains you sometimes get seepage from the aquifer, where the rocks are permeable.' He indicated a couple of points on the map. 'I've come across waterholes around there before now. But they're short-lived at best.'

'There's an aquifer under the sand?' I asked. If we could somehow tap that, all our problems would be over. Well, our shortage of water anyway. Tayber nodded.

'About three hundred metres down,' he said. 'Extracting it's what kept the town going.' I remembered the size of the hydro station he'd been hiding out in. There was certainly no chance of drilling down that deep with the equipment we had with us, even if we could have afforded the time it would take.

'Then we'll have to take our chances with the waterholes,' I said. I checked the map again. 'It won't be much of a detour. And if they're dry, we'll just have to ration what we've got.' Tayber looked worried, and I thought I understood why. If that became necessary, some of the weaker refugees probably wouldn't make it. But if the supply dump did turn out to have been looted, we'd all die of thirst before the issue of the fuel shortage had to be faced, whereas replenishing our water would buy us a few more days to deal with that problem if and when it came up. Not for the first time, and far from the last, I found myself reflecting that taking the hard decisions was part of my job, and the aspect of it I could most readily do without. (Well that, and facing innumerable hordes of the Emperor's

enemies all intent on killing me, of course.)

‘That’s going to stretch our fuel reserves,’ Tayber commented, but in the tone of a man who knows he’s already lost the argument. Feeling magnanimous in victory and quietly relieved not to have needed to exert the full weight of my authority to get my own way, I nodded in agreement.

‘It will,’ I conceded, ‘but there should be plenty more at the supply dump. Once we get our hands on it we’ll be well on our way.’

‘Where to, exactly?’ Kolfax asked, reminding me once more of his existence. I indicated the western continent on the little screen of the mapslate.

‘Here, eventually,’ I said. He made a short, harsh sound of incredulity deep within his throat, which I ignored easily, Jurgen’s periodic expectorations being considerably more explosive. ‘But in the short term...’ I zoomed in on the image, bringing the area around us into more detail. ‘The best route looks like this.’ I traced it, hopping from one supply dump to the next. ‘Out of the desert here, through the lowlands, and across the mountains.’ That was mildly disquieting, as there was only one major pass I could see, and it was bound to be crawling with greenskins. Oh well, we’d just have to face that problem when the time came. ‘Then across the coastal plain, hop over the peninsular, and we’re home free.’ If I said it fast enough, it almost sounded plausible. Kolfax snorted again.

‘You left out “through the ork army,”’ he said. It was a fair point too. Most of them would be congregating on the coastal plain, pouring into the compacted mass of them trying to flood across the narrow neck of land to the western continent. I shrugged.

‘We’ll think of something,’ I said, trying to sound confident. ‘There’s no point worrying about that just yet.’ The stocky civilian nodded.

‘Right,’ he agreed. ‘We’ll probably all be dead by then anyway.’

Old habits are surprisingly hard to break. Even though the number of proper troopers in our merry little band was outnumbered almost ten to one by the dead weight, I found myself walking the length of the convoy before we set off, having an encouraging word with random individuals, dispensing pious platitudes, and generally going through the motions of raising morale. To my surprise, it seemed to be working. Spirits seemed pretty high all round, and most of the poor wretches we’d saved had huge grins on their faces as we prepared to set off. Mind you, under the circumstances I suppose they

had a lot to smile about, having traded the absolute certainty of imminent death for the merely almost inevitable. (A feeling, which, having experienced it myself on far too many occasions over the last century or so, I can assure you is surprisingly comforting.)

I started at the rear of the convoy, where Grenbow was trying to instil some semblance of order among his ad hoc militia unit, assisted by a hard-faced man in the tattered remains of a PDF uniform, who alone among the recruits looked as if he knew what to do with the lasgun in his hands. The erstwhile vox-operator shrugged when I asked him how it was going.

‘Well enough,’ he said. He’d finally shed the useless backpack communicator, I noticed, leaving it propped up in the back of the truck he was commanding, along with the portion of our precious supplies Norbert had decreed they should take. To my vague surprise, the slate-shuffler had shown enough sense to ensure our food and water travelled with an armed escort, distributing it only among the five vehicles with a military presence aboard them, without making it too obvious that the objective was to reduce pilferage by as much as was feasible. ‘They’re as ready as they’ll ever be.’ His tone was enough to tell me how ready he thought that was, and I nodded my understanding.

‘I’m sure you’ll hold them together if push comes to shove,’ I told him.

Grenbow smiled without humour. ‘I’ve told them if the orks attack to switch to full auto,’ he said, ‘and just hold the trigger down till the powerpack runs dry.’ Something of my feelings must have shown on my face, because he shrugged. ‘I know. It’s a criminal waste of ammo. But at least that way they might keep the greenies off our backs for a short while. And if they don’t, lack of ammo will be the least of our worries.’

‘We can always recharge them later,’ I assured him, ‘and there should be plenty more powercells at the supply dump.’

‘We’ll get you there,’ one of his recruits assured me, a wiry young woman with cold eyes and a facial tattoo, no doubt one of the suspected gangers Tayber had mentioned. She was leaning proprietorially against the mounting of the vehicle’s heavy weapon, some kind of autocannon by the look of it, and I had the distinct impression that she’d spurned the standard issue small arm in favour of the most destructive piece of ordnance she could get her hands on.

‘I don’t doubt it,’ I assured her.

‘Hello, commissar.’ Felicia approached us, a large sack of something

metallic clanking over her shoulder, supported by one arm and her mechanical tail. Tools, I presumed. She had a couple of the civilians in tow, both carrying similar bundles, which she took one by one and slung over the armoured tailgate of the truck with a clangour sufficient to make a few of the more nervy recruits swing their weapons around to cover her for a moment, before relaxing with elaborate pantomimes of unconcern. The two artisans, I assumed, now commandeered as her assistants on a more or less permanent basis. 'Come to see us off?'

'Just checking things,' I assured her. 'I didn't want you missing the bus.'

She laughed as she clambered aboard, followed rather less gracefully a moment or two later by her underlings. In theory, travelling aboard the last vehicle, they'd be able to pull over and come to the assistance of any of the others, which might be having difficulties without the necessity of turning round. Something that Kolfax had assured us would be best avoided on the back trails, and since his job had been to keep them open, I trusted his opinion on that.

'Wouldn't miss this for the galaxy,' she assured me, her attention already claimed by the damaged vox. 'Wow, this has taken a beating.'

'Can you fix it?' I asked, the possibility insinuating itself into my mind for the first time. If she could, we'd be able to use it as a relay, increasing the range of the comm-beads, and listening out for any other Imperial stragglers in the vicinity. If there were other PDF units in the area they'd be bound to head for the supply caches too, so it was a fair bet they'd be in range at least part of the time.

'I can try,' Felicia said cheerfully, already beginning to poke about in the interior of the casing with her me Chadendrite. 'No promises, mind.'

'Of course not.' I moved on. The next truck held Ariott and the worst medical cases, simply debilitated by their ordeal for the most part, but some exhibiting more serious consequences of their mistreatment by the orks: bone fractures, dislocations, and internal bleeding generally. The amiable vet looked up as I approached.

'Commissar,' he said, as though we'd just been introduced at a formal party. Despite my growing sense of urgency I slowed my pace.

'Doctor,' I responded, making him smile ironically. 'How are your patients?' He shrugged, looking terminally careworn for a moment. Then the air of good humour was back.

'If they were my usual customers I'd have put half of them down by now.'

The smile became a little less strained. 'However, under the circumstances, them being middle-sized and all, I'm just having to rely on time and analgesics. A quick word with the Emperor wouldn't hurt either.' He lowered his voice. 'There's very little I can do for the worst cases, to be honest. Just keep them stable until we reach somewhere with the proper facilities.'

'That's a better chance than they'd have without you,' I pointed out, leaving him looking a little more encouraged.

The next couple of buggies were stuffed with civilians. Then I came to the truck commandeered by what remained of Bravo Squad. Tayber I'd briefed already, so I passed them by with only a few words, and a nod to Norbert, who was travelling with them and the most precious of our resources. They were about halfway along the convoy, sandwiching the rest of the civilian vehicles between them and the second militia truck. As I passed the rest of the refugees, a groundswell of cheering seemed to follow me, rippling back and forth along the line, and I wondered for a moment if I should try to quiet them; but once the engines were started, any attempt at stealth would be out of the question anyway. Better to let them blow off a little steam. Things were bound to get bad again soon enough, so they might as well enjoy themselves while they could.

Trooper Tarvil had everything more or less under control among his makeshift command. If anything they seemed overconfident, eager to start taking their revenge against the greenskins, and I took him aside for a quiet word.

'You might have to rein them in a bit,' I told him, and he nodded.

'I know. The mood they're in now they could start taking risks. I'll wait until one of them overreaches himself, and pull him up just before he gets hurt. That way I'll only have to bawl them out once and everyone'll learn from it.'

'Might work,' I conceded. 'But if you'll take my advice, you'll crack down hard once we get on the move. This is a combat patrol, not a pleasure jaunt.'

He was bright enough to listen, I'll give him that. When the shooting started, despite my apprehension, he held them together better than I'd expected.

Our own buggy was next, Jurgen already mounted up and ready to go, which just left the lead truck, containing Hascom's rabble and our native

guide, Kolfax. I had a quick word with both, emphasising their vital importance to our enterprise, but not enough to put them under any more pressure than they already felt.

‘I’ll get you there,’ Kolfax said, and climbed aboard the truck, next to the driver.

Hascom watched him go, with a mildly dubious expression. ‘Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have him with you, sir? I’d have thought your place was at the head of the convoy.’

I shook my head. ‘I’d rather hang back a little, so we can help out if anyone gets into trouble,’ I told him. Besides, if the tracks were mined, I’d rather not be the one to find out.

Hascom nodded, taking the feeble excuse at face value. ‘As you wish, sir.’ He saluted smartly. ‘We won’t let you down, I can promise you that.’ As he swung himself aboard the ramshackle vehicle, his ragtag unit cheered as though they were off on a sector wakes⁶³ rather than about to enter combat, and it belatedly occurred to me that they thought it was an honour to be taking point. Well, good for them, if they were keeping me out of the line of fire they might as well feel good about it.

‘Comms check,’ I said, returning to my own vehicle, and activating the tiny transceiver in my ear as I scrambled aboard. There seemed a lot more room now the bulk of our supplies had been distributed around the convoy, and I shrugged off my greatcoat as Jurgen, Tayber, Grenbow, Tarvil and Hascom sounded off one by one. It was getting warmer, and I folded the heavy cloth into a makeshift cushion on top of one of the boxes of bolter ammo. I waited a moment, listening to the hiss of static as I re-buckled my weapon belt and sat down, wedging myself into a corner as comfortably as I could. ‘Kolfax, can you hear me?’

‘Yep.’ The artisan’s voice was as curt as ever. ‘Took me a minute to figure out how you work this thing.’

‘Fine.’ I hid my irritation easily. ‘If everyone’s ready then, we might as well go.’

The roar of our engines starting up shattered the silence, the noise building to a series of peaks as each badly tuned vehicle retched into life one after the other. Every time I thought the racket couldn’t possibly become any louder or more intolerable it redoubled in volume, the ever-present echoes from the sand dunes surrounding us making things ten times worse. After what seemed like an eternity, the truck in front of us lurched into motion.

Then, with a jerk, which seemed specifically designed to underline the futility of my coat folding efforts, Jurgen kicked our own transport into gear. There was no more time to wonder if I'd made the right decision. For better or worse we were committed, rolling towards the destiny which has continued to shape the course of my life ever since.

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FIFTEEN

The day wore on in a monotonous haze of dust, noise, heat and boredom, not to mention the spine-jarring effects of the buggy's primitive construction. Before long, I felt the urge to take a drink, but held off with a considerable effort of will. Partly because in order to maintain my position among so many desperate and disparate individuals I had to be seen to be leading by example, and partly because I knew from experience that slaking my thirst now would only make me feel twice as parched before very long. If we found water where Kolfax hoped it might be I could give way to the impulse with a clear conscience (or as clear as mine ever was, at least), but if we were to be disappointed in our quest, we'd have no option but to continue with Norbert's rationing scheme, and in that case I'd definitely need my share later on.

The road we followed led away from the main highway, and just in time too. Looking back with the amplivisor, I was able, despite the shaking imparted by our unsteady mode of transport, to make out a number of the ork trucks and bike things scooting along it. Fearing that we'd be noticed and attract pursuit, I alerted Grenbow and his team, but the greenskins ignored us, no doubt taking our ramshackle convoy for one of their own, if they even registered our presence at all. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief, pleased to have my judgement vindicated, and was tactful enough not to remind Tayber of the fact.

'Seems like we've given them the slip,' the sergeant conceded.

I agreed, though allowing a note of caution to enter my voice. 'For the time being at least.'

I brought the others, apart from Kolfax, who didn't need to know the details of what was going on, into the network. 'Let's not get complacent.

There could be isolated groups of them wandering about out here.’⁶⁴ I was rewarded with a chorus of pledges to remain alert, and sat, cradling the bolter, waiting for the first sign of an attack, which never came.

Shortly after noon we came to a halt, and Kolfax came trotting back down the line to talk to me face to face. Despite the simplicity of its operation, he didn’t feel comfortable exchanging information over the comm-bead, especially when he was the bearer of bad news.

‘If there’s water anywhere around here it should be over that ridge,’ he told me without preamble. ‘But it doesn’t look good.’ He gestured with a thumb almost as grimy as Jurgen’s; although to be fair I was pretty well caked in the stuff myself. The track we followed had long since ceased to be anything that could possibly be dignified with the name of a road, consisting of little more than a slightly flatter strip of hard packed dirt over which the sand drifted in a thin, choking film which the wind of our passage whipped up into a small localised dust storm. What conditions were like further down the convoy, completely enveloped in that cloud of grit, I could only imagine. (Quite vividly too, which is why I’d selected the second slot for Jurgen and myself, rather than tucking us into the middle where we’d be best screened from incoming fire.)

‘How can you tell?’ I asked, unwinding the sash from around my face, where it was doing duty as an improvised dust mask. In spite of the protection it afforded, my throat felt lined with the stuff, and I took a carefully graduated mouthful of water from my canteen before continuing. It felt as though I was swallowing a ball of mud, but when I spoke again, fighting the urge to drain the whole bottle as I resealed it, my voice was noticeably clearer. ‘It all looks the same to me.’

‘That’s just the problem,’ Kolfax said. I clambered down to join him, grateful for the chance to ease my cramped and aching limbs, Jurgen falling into place at my shoulder as usual. He was carrying his lasgun, and raised a hand to pull the strip of rag he’d tied around his own face clear of his mouth.

‘Everything all right, sir?’

‘That’s what we’re going to find out,’ I said. I glanced down the line of vehicles, which were gradually becoming visible behind us as the cloud of dust we’d stirred up began to settle, staining them all the colour of the sand. Little terracotta passengers began pointing and gesticulating in our direction, clearly wondering what we were up to. Great, that was all we

needed. I activated the comm-bead. 'Rest stop,' I voxed. 'Pass it down the line. No one's to get out of sight of the vehicle they're riding in.' That ought to damp down any speculation, and keep the curious from following us. But just to make sure... 'And distribute some food. One ration bar apiece, one cup of water.' That was well within Norbert's recommendations, and it was about time we had something to eat. As I'd expected, that was more than enough to keep the civilians' minds occupied, and the troopers busy handing out the rations.

Come to think of it, now that the thought of food had been planted, I felt hungry myself. I pulled a couple of the ration bars from my trouser pocket and handed one to Kolfax, while Jurgen retrieved one of his own from somewhere in the recesses of his uniform. Despite their provenance, they didn't seem to have suffered much, tasting just as good as they ever did, which is to say of nothing particularly identifiable. Nevertheless, they took the edge off, and as we crested the ridge I found myself beginning to feel mildly optimistic.

'I was afraid of that,' Kolfax told me, his voice slightly muffled by the compacted cake of Emperor knows what he was chewing at the time. I surveyed the slight depression in the ground, which had become visible as we came over the rise. It was full of scrubby plants, most of them encrusted with thorns, which looked as though they could poke through ceramite.

'Surely that's good,' I said. 'If there are plants here there must be water.'

Kolfax's face contorted in what appeared to be an ironic grin. 'There was,' he said. 'But it's dried up now.' He bent to examine a large boulder, and pointed into a small cleft beneath it. A tiny, desiccated plant still clung on there, surviving somehow despite the odds. I knew how it felt. 'See that?'

Jurgen nodded. 'It's a plant,' he said, presumably in case no one else had ever seen one before.

'Rock sage,' Kolfax said. 'Last time I came by here the whole area was carpeted with it.' He gestured towards the thorn-choked hollow. 'That was a pool, believe it or not. Never expected to get that lucky this time, you hardly ever find standing water out here. But rock sage means it's close enough to the surface to get at with a spade.'

'What about those?' I asked, pointing at the thorn bushes again. 'They must need water too, mustn't they?' Kolfax shook his head.

'Ripperspikes. The roots go down ten, twenty metres. We've nothing that'll get down that far, right?' My silence was all the answer that he

needed. 'And even if we did,' he concluded sourly, 'we'd need to clear the ground first. You don't even want to start thinking about that.'

I stared at the profusion of thorns, and privately agreed.

'Then we'd better get moving,' I said. 'And hope we have better luck at the other hole.'

Kolfax nodded. 'Don't hold your breath,' he counselled.

We returned to the trucks in a sober mood, but I had little time to brood on the matter. Hardly had we crested the rise again, concealing its arid disappointment, than my comm-bead activated.

'Commissar.' It was Grenbow's voice, sounding agitated. 'We've got a bit of a problem here.'

'What kind of a problem?' I asked, fighting the urge to break into a trot despite the enervating heat. Instead I increased my pace to a brisk, purposeful walk. No point in agitating the civilians unnecessarily. The vox-operator hesitated, trying to find the right words.

'A couple of the militia are having an argument,' he said at last.

'Can't you deal with it?' I asked, as Kolfax peeled off to rejoin the lead truck. Jorgen, as usual, stayed with me. 'You're supposed to be in charge.'

'They're not listening to me,' he said.

Great. We'd only been travelling for half a day and things were already falling apart. Loosening the laspistol in my holster, I increased my pace as much as I dared, wondering why in the holy name of Terra I'd ever thought it was a good idea to give these frakwits guns. At least whatever the dispute was about they hadn't started using them on each other. Yet.

That, as I was to discover a moment or two later, was largely because Grenbow had inserted himself between the two antagonists, with more courage than good sense if you asked me, but at least it had prevented things from escalating. The girl with the facial tattoo had a knife out, shifting her weight from foot to foot as though trying to find a way past him, but so far good sense or the lasgun in the vox-operator's hands had dissuaded her from making the attempt. She was glaring at a man in the tattered remains of a uniform identical to that of the local arbitrator I'd found lying dead in the street back in Prosperity Wells, who was looking murderously back, his knuckles white on the stock of his own weapon.

'What's going on here?' I asked, striding up to the little tableau with every vestige of authority the schola had endowed me with.

The rest of the militia team parted to let me through, watching the

entertainment with every sign of interest, although to my unspoken relief none of them seemed inclined to take sides. At least that would simplify things. Felicia's artisans were watching too, perched on the tailgate of the truck as though waiting for someone to pass the caba nuts. The tech-priest herself was still engrossed in the innards of the damaged vox, merely glancing up to wave a greeting to me before going back to work, humming happily to herself. After a moment, I identified the tune as *The Tracks on the Land Raider Crush the Heretics*.⁶⁵

Grenbow turned to me with evident relief.

'Demara spilled some of Tamworth's water ration.'

'It was an accident!' the girl said. 'Stupid ork-reamer didn't watch where he was going!'

The former enforcer flushed even more deeply, and tried to bring his lasgun up despite Grenbow's presence between them.

'You jogged my arm on purpose and you know it, you lying sack of slith!' Grenbow tried to restrain him, and Tamworth jabbed the young trooper in the stomach with the muzzle of his lasgun. Grenbow folded, riding the blow and allowing his armour to take the brunt of it, rising swiftly to strike the recalcitrant militiaman in the face with the butt of his own weapon. Tamworth staggered backwards and Demara rushed at him, raising the knife to strike.

'That's enough!' I drew my laspistol in one swift motion, planting a single bolt in the sand between them, and the two combatants froze. 'Jurgen, take their weapons.'

My aide moved to comply, plucking the lasgun from Tamworth's hands and shrugging the sling into place across his shoulders.

Demara took a step backwards as he reached for her knife. 'That's mine,' she protested. 'I took it off a greenie myself.'

'Then put it away until you get the chance to use it on one,' I said steadily. I had no doubt that Jurgen could take it from her easily enough if she continued to wave it about, and it was a minor enough concession to let her keep it. Nevertheless, it would begin to take the heat out of the situation, if she was bright enough to see that. Fortunately she was, and sheathed the blade without any further argument.

'Good.' I put my own weapon away. 'What happened?'

Tamworth and Demara both drew breath to renew their accusations, and I raised my hand again. 'Grenbow.'

‘We’d just finished handing out the rations to the civilians,’ Grenbow said crisply. ‘So I gave the order to serve ourselves.’

‘About reaming time,’ one of the recruits behind me muttered, and I turned, silencing him with a look. Grenbow fixed the man with an almost equally intimidating stare.

‘Congratulations,’ he said. ‘You’ve just volunteered for double sentry duty.’ I nodded approvingly. It seemed Tayber had chosen his team leaders well. The interruption dealt with, he returned to the matter at hand. ‘These two were next to one another in line. Demara knocked Tamworth’s elbow as she turned, and spilled some of his drink.’

‘How much did he lose?’ I asked.

Grenbow shrugged. ‘About half a cup.’

‘That’s a lie!’ Tamworth shouted. ‘I dropped the whole thing!’

‘You let the cup go when you came at me!’ Demara countered, her fists balling, but she showed enough good sense not to go for the knife again. ‘If you’re going thirsty it’s your own stupid fault!’

‘That’s enough.’ I silenced the pair of them again. ‘In case you’ve forgotten, you volunteered to serve in the defence of this convoy, which means you’re both subject to military rules and regulations. And that includes military discipline.’

‘Oh, I’m scared,’ the girl retorted sarcastically. ‘What do you think you can possibly do to us that the orks haven’t already?’

‘I can shoot you, for one thing,’ I said mildly. I turned to Tamworth. ‘That’s the prescribed penalty for striking a superior officer, incidentally.’ He went suddenly quiet, the bruise on his face darkening as the blood drained from the rest of it, clearly wondering if I’d make good on the threat. Good, let him stew for a bit.

The rest of them muttered uneasily among themselves for a moment, and then went back to watching us even more intently than before.

‘You don’t have to do that, do you?’ Demara asked, anger gradually giving way to common sense. ‘He might be a reamhead, but—’

‘I don’t need any help from ganger trash!’ Tamworth snapped, and I nailed him with my second best commissarial glare. So that was it.

‘In case you haven’t noticed,’ I said mildly, ‘things have changed. Whatever differences you used to have are dead and buried. Otherwise, I can make that more than a figure of speech, understood?’ Tamworth nodded wordlessly. ‘Good.’ I turned back to Grenbow. ‘Next time we stop for

water, he gets half a cup to make up for the portion he wasted. So does she.'

'I told you it was an accident!' Demara protested.

I shrugged. 'I don't care. It's been wasted, that's all that matters. Think of it as an incentive to be more careful next time.'

Both the erstwhile combatants were now glaring at me more than at each other, which I took as a positive sign. I turned to Grenbow. 'I'm not going to shoot this frakhead for hitting you. We need all the fighters we can get right now. If you think further penalties are required, use your own judgement, it's your team.' I jerked a thumb at Demara. 'The same goes for her. I don't want to see either of them brawling again.'

'You won't.' Grenbow assured me.

'Glad to hear it,' I said. I raised my voice a little. 'That goes for the rest of you too. The survival of every single one of us depends on you doing the job you signed up for, and we can't afford any dead weight. The next time a fight breaks out I'm leaving whoever started it behind. Without water or supplies. Pass the word.' Knowing better than to undermine a dramatic exit with any further rhetoric, I turned on my heel and walked away. After a moment, Jurgen handed the lasgun he'd confiscated to Grenbow and hurried after me.

All in all, I thought I'd handled that rather well.

Even so, I made a point of seeking out Grenbow once we'd made camp that night, around a small rockcrete bunker which Kolfax informed me was intended as a way station for people like himself, who in happier times had kept the network of back roads we followed as marginally passable as they still were. The door wasn't locked, which was hardly surprising as there was nothing worth stealing inside, or at least nothing worth going to the trouble of coming all this way from civilisation to take. Nevertheless, I had the place stripped, under Norbert's supervision, adding a few tools, a little bedding, and a frighteningly small box of preserved foodstuffs to our meagre stockpile. The only other thing we found there was a porno slate, apparently left behind by one of Kolfax's colleagues (at least if it was his he didn't bother to claim it), which I surreptitiously diverted in Jurgen's direction. He'd had a lot to put up with in the last few days, and I felt the least I could do was allow him to indulge in his hobby for a while. No sign of any tanna, of course, and I felt a little envious for a moment, wishing my own desires could have been satisfied so easily.

‘Any problems?’ I asked the young trooper, and he shook his head, sipping at his beaker of water, his face barely visible in the glow of the portable heater we’d scavenged from the workmen’s hut. As I pulled my coat tighter, I found myself wishing for a mug of recaf, but hot drinks were out of the question for the foreseeable future. Boiling the precious liquid would have wasted too much of it as steam, a frightening amount according to Norbert’s figures, so even that minor solace was denied me. I sipped my own tepid water as he replied, fighting the craving to gulp it straight down. Slow and careful was the only way to ensure that most of it was absorbed by my parched tissues, rather than passing straight through.

‘None whatsoever,’ he said. ‘No one’s keen to find out if you were bluffing about leaving any troublemakers behind.’

‘I wasn’t,’ I said, hoping I wouldn’t have to prove the point. ‘We can’t afford to be fighting among ourselves.’ I took another sip of the lukewarm fluid, trying to ignore the faintly metallic aftertaste. ‘Which reminds me, what did you do about Demara and Tamworth after I left?’

‘The worst thing I could think of,’ he replied, with a hint of amusement. ‘I paired them off, assigned him as loader for her autocannon.’

‘That was resourceful,’ I conceded. If the members of a heavy weapon team weren’t physically joined at the hip they might just as well be.

The young trooper nodded again. ‘Now they’ll have to get along. Both their lives depend on it once we get into combat.’ He shrugged. ‘And in case they’re still under the impression that they’ve got off lightly, they’re standing double watches every night from now until the stars freeze over. Together.’

‘Whoever assigned you to comms wasn’t doing their job,’ I told him. ‘Looks to me like you’re a sergeant just waiting to happen.’

To my surprise he laughed. ‘Too much like hard work,’ he said.

Feeling obscurely cheered by the conversation, I headed off through the makeshift camp, trying not to think too much about the following day. It wasn’t all good news: two of Ariott’s patients had died during the day, the rigours of the journey proving too much for them, and I found myself wondering how much that would stretch our reserves of food and water. Hardly at all, unfortunately. I checked in with Tayber, confirming the positions of our sentries, and swung the amplivisor around to make sure they were all where they were supposed to be.

To my relief, I was able to discern their faint shapes against the lighter

darkness of the star speckled sky, so at least the orks weren't sneaking up on us under cover of night (not that that seemed like their style in any case). Tamworth and Demara were sitting on a sand dune in sullen silence, their backs to one another, but making no move to renew hostilities, so Grenbow's unorthodox solution seemed to be working.

Last of all, I went to find Kolfax, who was still in the depths of the bothy, the faint glow of a low powered luminator filling the space around him. He glanced up as I entered, and went back to prising a ventilator grille off the wall.

'Commissar,' he said, swinging the sheet of perforated metal to the floor. He reached into the cavity behind it and removed something. 'Ah, thought it might still be here.'

'What might?' I asked. By way of reply he uncorked a bottle and took a swig from it with a sigh of satisfaction. The sweet smell of cheap, mass-produced amasec rolled out on his breath as he exhaled, and he lifted the bottle towards me.

'Hid this the last time I was by here, just in case.' He nodded at it. 'Want some?'

Well of course I did, but I had more sense than to take it. In my current desiccated state it would have been like drinking neat alcohol. I shook my head.

'Not now. Save it for when we get to where we're going.'

Kolfax stared at me in astonishment. 'You really believe this slith, don't you?' He tilted the bottle again.

I held out my hand for it. 'The truth is we're going to die out here. Better get used to the idea.'

'You might,' I said. 'But I won't. Give me the bottle, you've had enough.' His eyes locked on mine for a moment. 'I need you sober tomorrow.'

'Ream off.' He took another swallow of the cheap spirit. I drew my pistol.

'Last chance,' I said. Kolfax laughed.

'You can't shoot me. You said it yourself, you need me tomorrow.'

'Yes I can,' I said. 'Just nowhere fatal. You can find water without kneecaps, can't you?' He stared at me, wondering if I'd go through with the threat, which actually made two of us, although he didn't need to know that. After a moment he caved, and handed it over.

'You're a hard man,' he said.

'It's my job.' To his surprise, I handed the bottle back. 'Take this over to

Medicae Ariott, will you? I think he can make better use of this than either of us.' The primary aid kit from the survival pod had been pretty well cleaned out by now, and at the very least he could use it as a makeshift counterseptic. Kolfax nodded, any resentment he might have felt neatly undermined by the display of trust I'd just given. If I read the man right, that should be enough to keep him in line, at least for now.

'See you tomorrow,' he said, turning away.

The next day, with the blessed absence of any more fighting in the ranks, turned out to be little more than a repeat of the previous one. Our ramshackle convoy bounced and snarled its way across the desolate landscape, coating us all in dust, until I would cheerfully have killed for a drink of fresh water. Not that I was the only one. When we stopped at noon for a break, Norbert came over for a quiet word.

'Water levels are getting critical,' he warned me. 'How much longer until we reach this supply dump?'

'Day after tomorrow,' I said, 'if Kolfax doesn't get us lost.' He nodded, looking less relieved than I'd hoped.

'It should just last,' he assured me. Then he hesitated. 'Do you want to institute more severe rationing? That should give us another couple of days.'

'I'd rather not.' I indicated the milling mass of cramped and filthy civilians queuing up patiently for their cup of water and handful of food. 'They've got little enough to look forward to as it is. If we take even that away...' I trailed off, unwilling to complete the thought.

Norbert nodded. 'It'll be cutting it fine though,' he warned. 'If we run into any delays...'

'You'll be the first to know,' I assured him. Fortunately we didn't, and the afternoon passed in bone rattling tedium, just as the morning had done.

It was coming on towards the evening before anything changed, the sun dipping close enough to the horizon to force us to squint, and I began to wonder if it was time to make camp. I activated the comm-bead.

'Kolfax,' I said. 'Is there anywhere around here we can stop for the night?'

'I hope so,' he responded. We'd barely exchanged a few words since our conversation in the bothy the previous night, but he seemed a little more open with me now, as if the confrontation over the amasec bottle had increased his confidence in me. Certainly, if he continued to harbour doubts

about our chances of success he was keeping them to himself, which was a considerable improvement. 'We should know before long.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I asked, hoisting myself up on the bolter mount to take a better look at the vehicle in front. Seeing my head appear, Kolfax waved an acknowledgement.

'We've made better time than I thought. Look.' He gestured off to the right, and narrowing my eyes I was barely able to make out a faint discolouration in the shadow of a rock. I just had time to register that it appeared to have a greenish hue before the dust cloud eddied again, obscuring it from view.

'Is that what I think it is?' I asked, hope flaring. Despite his habitual cynicism, Kolfax was unable to keep a note of cautious optimism from his voice.

'I hope so. We'll know as soon as we cross the next ridge.'

Although it could only have been a handful of moments, the wait seemed agonising, stretching out before us like a foretaste of eternity. At last, the truck ahead of us crested the next rise in the trail, and began to be eclipsed by the hummock of rock.

'Well?' I asked, but before Kolfax could reply the entire group accompanying him erupted in cheers.

'We're in luck,' he assured me, somewhat superfluously under the circumstances. I didn't have to wait long to confirm it. Jurgen jolted us over the rise, and I found myself staring at a wide depression in the sand carpeted with tiny leaves, curled tight against the baking sun.

'Rock sage?' I asked.

'You know it.' Kolfax waved from the truck in front, an expansive gesture taking in the whole depression, which must have been over a kilometre across. 'But that's not the best bit.'

The trail widened, and Jurgen was able to pull out a little, allowing me to peer past the tailgate of the truck in front.

For a moment, my mind failed to register the significance of what I was seeing, a dazzling shimmer of blood-red radiance reflecting the light of the setting sun, and I thought the plants must be flowering. Then the coin dropped.

'It's water!' I said. 'A whole lake of it!'

'Looks that way,' Kolfax agreed. His voice took on a tinge of awe. 'I've never seen anything like it. Are you always this lucky?'

‘So far,’ I assured him, wondering how much longer it could possibly hold.

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SIXTEEN

The improvement in morale that followed our arrival at the temporary oasis was quite remarkable, even to someone as used as I was to tracking its ebb and flow. I suppose that was because for the first time in my career I was being forced to deal with civilians *en masse*. Up until then I'd only encountered them as individuals, usually in some protocol constricted social environment, or bearing self-righteous complaints about some piece of off-duty misbehaviour by one or more of the gunners whose moral welfare I was supposed to give a frak about. (The latter kind seldom getting any closer to me than my outer office, where Jurgen could be relied on to hold the complainers off indefinitely unless the infraction in question was particularly serious or amusing). I must confess, I was agreeably surprised by the resilience our unlooked-for charges had displayed so far, although I suppose the orks had done a pretty good job of winnowing them down to the hardest of the inhabitants of the unfortunate community they'd come from.

The first thing I did was vox the PDF and militia leaders, ordering them to move up the convoy as soon as the trail had widened enough to permit overtaking, so that by the time the bulk of the civilians arrived there was a cordon of armed men and women standing between them and the lake. I could picture, all too vividly, the lamin rush⁶⁶ which would otherwise result, and had no intention of allowing the precious liquid to become so contaminated with churned-up mud from scores of careless feet that we'd be unable to drink it after all. Luckily, that, and the promise of hot food now we had the wherewithal to prepare it, was enough to keep them quiet, for a while at least.

'How much can we take?' I asked Norbert, savouring the mug of recaf

Jurgen had thoughtfully provided me with. The scrivener shrugged, a broad grin on his face for the first time since I'd met him, and juggled some figures on the slate in his hand.

'If we fill every spare container we've got, I think we can forget about rationing,' he told me, something suspiciously close to glee threatening to break through his bureaucratic reserve. 'That'll be more than enough to see us to the supply dump, and a few days beyond that if necessary.'

'If the place turns out to have been looted, you mean,' Tayber put in. The three of us were sitting slightly apart from the throng, in the lee of one of the trucks, enjoying our meal in as much privacy as the makeshift camp would afford.

Norbert tilted his head in acknowledgement. 'Quite. Even in that unfortunate event, we can worry mainly about food and fuel.' He took another forkful of the salma omelette that Jurgen had prepared for us with every sign of satisfaction.

'We'll do that, then,' I said, 'if you can get your people collecting the water as soon as possible.'

Norbert nodded. 'I'll get right on it.' He seemed almost on the point of abandoning his meal to commence the task, and I urged him to sit down and finish it, which he seemed more than happy to do. 'Anything we should take care of after that?'

'Well I don't know about you,' I said, 'but I could do with a bath. And perhaps it wouldn't hurt to organise a laundry detail while we're about it.' I glanced at Norbert again. 'We won't need to extract any more water tomorrow morning, will we?'

'By no means.' If anything, he looked even happier than before, despite the extra work I'd just dumped on him. 'We'll have more than enough.' He cleaned his plate with a lump of bread, and departed, still chewing.

'Well, that's some good news,' Tayber conceded, not quite managing to conceal the lifting of his own mood now I'd suggested bathing. Emperor knows I felt itchy and foetid enough after only a few days, let alone the weeks of privation he must have endured.

'Glad to hear it,' Felicia said, appearing around the corner of the truck with Grenbow's vox-pack dangling casually from her mechadendrite. 'What is? Ooh, salma, haven't tasted that in a while.'

'Help yourself,' I said. I glanced up at Jurgen. 'Can you fix another one of these for the engineeer?'

‘Of course.’ Jurgen started fussing with his portable stove, and I waved Felicia to the folding chair Norbert had just vacated. She sat gratefully, depositing the vox set on the sand next to me.

‘I’ve managed to fix it,’ she said. ‘But don’t expect too much. I had to take some parts from a power drill we found in the roadmen’s hut to make a new flux capacitor, and I ran out of sanctified oil, so I had to bless some lube gel and dab that on instead.’ She shrugged. ‘It’s more or less functioning now, though.’

‘More or less is a lot better than not at all,’ I assured her. ‘What sort of range has it got?’

‘Couple of kilometres I should think.’ She accepted a plate of food from my aide, glancing up at him with a cheerful smile. ‘Thanks, Jurgen, you’re a cog.’⁶⁷

‘You’re welcome, miss.’ He flushed uncomfortably, and busied himself with some small task, which seemed to require his urgent and undivided attention.

‘Excellent,’ I said. It wasn’t as much as I’d have liked, which would have been something with enough range and power to call in a shuttle to extract me (along with a fighter escort to be on the safe side), but we could relay the comm-bead signals through it and increase their range dramatically. That meant we could spread out a bit more, and perhaps deploy a few scouts so we weren’t moving quite as blindly as before. All in all, our chances of survival had just been materially improved.

‘Who’s going to operate it?’ Tayber asked. ‘Grenbow’s running one of the militia teams.’ An assignment he’d been given purely because, with the vox out of commission, there was no call for his specialised skills, which were suddenly in demand again. On the other hand, removing him from the team now, just when he was turning them into something approaching a cohesive unit, would be catastrophic.

‘And from what I’ve seen we’d be idiots not to leave him there,’ I said. ‘At least until things have settled down a bit.’

Tayber nodded. ‘I agree,’ he said, apparently under the happy delusion that hearing his opinion would have made the slightest difference to my own. ‘But there’s no one else.’

‘I could work it,’ Felicia said, slightly indistinctly. She nodded at the bulky backpack. ‘The principles are simple enough.’

‘But you don’t know the proper procedures,’ Tayber objected. ‘Call signs,

protocols...'

'She doesn't have to,' I pointed out. 'If the beads are tied in to it anyway to make up a relay net, you or I can respond to any incoming messages.' Tayber nodded, the sudden realisation of the full implications of the little transceiver in his ear finally dawning on him. 'All Felicia has to do is keep the channels open and listen out for any stray signal traffic.'

'I can do that,' the engineer assured us, swallowing the last mouthful of salma and belching loudly. She grinned, mildly embarrassed, and handed the plate to my aide. 'Sorry about that, I'm not used to having a full stomach again yet. Thanks Jurgen, that was delicious.' Something of an overstatement given my aide's somewhat basic culinary skills, but considering what she'd probably been eating for the last couple of months, understandable all the same. I smiled, intending to dissipate any remaining traces of embarrassment.

'Never thought I'd hear a tech-priest say that,' I said. 'I was under the impression you all considered flavour an irrelevance where food was concerned.'

Felicia grinned back. 'We're supposed to disregard fleshly pleasures in our pursuit of the ideal of the machine,' she agreed cheerfully. 'But some of them are pretty hard to give up.' I nodded in response, beginning to see why her tutors at the seminary had found her so difficult to deal with. 'So what's for dessert?'

The next morning dawned with a palpable air of optimism, which swept the whole convoy. Despite the chill of daybreak, I essayed a final dip in the pool, reflecting ruefully that I'd definitely been hanging around with Valhallans for far too long,⁶⁸ and I was far from the only one; it seemed as though half the refugees had had the same idea. I passed Felicia on my way to the pool, heading in the opposite direction, her hair wet and her robe clinging to her still damp body enough to make it more than clear that she was beginning to fill out nicely now she was getting some proper food again.

'Are you still comfortable with the vox arrangements?' I asked, partly to reassure myself, and partly to enjoy the view for a little longer. Felicia nodded, not fooled for a moment I suspect.

'Fine,' she said. 'Grenbow's in the truck with me, don't forget. I can always ask him for advice if I need it.'

‘I’m sure you won’t,’ I assured her, and resumed my leisurely stroll to the water’s edge. A good couple of dozen people had beaten me to it, laughing and splashing as if they were at a resort spa somewhere, instead of deep behind enemy lines. Two of them, I noticed with some surprise, were Demara and Tamworth, chucking handfuls of water at each other like a couple of juvies.

Throwing my towel aside, I plunged in, braced for the invigorating shock, and swam a few strokes beneath the surface, savouring the relative calm. Sound was attenuated, and light filtered dimly through my reflexively closed eyes. For the first time since my abrupt arrival on Perlia, I felt truly at peace.

It was too good to last, of course. By the time I’d dried off, dressed, and collected some breakfast from Jurgen (who had already reacquired his habitual patina of grime, despite bathing for at least as long as I had the evening before), I’d already dealt with half a dozen minor crises, or to be more precise palmed them off on Tayber or Norbert. None of them serious in themselves, but all nagging inconveniences, which I tried to convince myself were not going to set the pattern for the day.

Unfortunately they did. Kolfax continued to guide us as unerringly as before, still basking in the kudos of having led us to water, but the trail was as hard to follow as ever, if not more so. The cobbled-together vehicles roared and lurched their way through the barren terrain as if in pain, and the ever-present racket combined with the vertiginous lurching of our progress and the relentless heat of the sun to induce a blinding headache before less than an hour had passed.

‘Dehydration,’ Ariott diagnosed when I sought him out at our first rest stop. ‘Space your drinks, that’s all I can suggest.’ Hopeless asking for an analgesic, as his patients needed the limited supply far more than I did, and demanding one would be a mortal blow to my fragile leadership in any case. Instead I smiled grimly.

‘Easier said than done,’ I said. Getting a canteen to your lips without spilling half of it was no mean feat aboard an ork vehicle of any description. I drank a little more under his critical scrutiny, washing the dust out of my mouth for the umpteenth time. By this point, everyone was coated with the stuff again, which was all the more irksome for having so recently been free of it.

Ariott nodded. ‘You’re telling me,’ he agreed, and I belatedly remembered

that he had the responsibility for keeping his patients watered as well as himself. I enquired after them, and the makeshift medicae shook his head. 'No more fatalities at any rate, that's something to thank the Emperor for.'

'Indeed it is,' I said, as tactfully as I could, and left him to get on with things.

The afternoon was little better, and culminated in a two-hour delay while Felicia used a couple of her scavenged spares to get one of the civilian transports going again after something in the engine gave way with a catastrophic *crack* that resonated from the dunes around us and had half the armed guards reaching for their weapons. I amused myself by bawling out the rest for inattention, reasoning that if I felt miserable I might as well spread it around, but for some reason it positively encouraged them. Eventually, to everyone's relief, the tech-priest crawled out from under the pile of assorted scrap to pronounce herself satisfied and in need of a cold drink.

'Any joy with the vox?' I asked, joining her in a beaker of lukewarm water, which was the closest we could manage under the circumstances, and she shook her head.

'Not a thing.' Remembering how I'd inadvertently contacted Tayber, I'd asked her to keep scanning for any transmissions on Imperial frequencies. 'I could try broadcasting something, and see who replies.'

I shook my head. 'It could be orks,' I pointed out. 'Best not to let anyone else know we're around until we're sure there are friends out there.'

'Right.' Felicia nodded, and took a swig of water. A glitter of devilment entered her eyes. 'The thing is,' she said slowly, 'what if everyone else out there's thinking the same thing you are?' She grinned and wandered off, her mechanical tail twitching in automatic counterpoint to her hips, leaving me uncharacteristically speechless.

'Oh frak,' I said. I hadn't thought of that.

As it turned out, that was a question the following day was to answer in no uncertain terms, but when we made camp for the night I had no way of knowing that. The headache was still with me, mercifully receding a little as the cool night winds began to blow, but not enough for me to welcome the sight of Kolfax brandishing the mapslate.

'How bad is it?' I asked, and he shrugged, a silhouette of greater darkness against the rich, deep indigo of the sky behind him.

‘Not as bad as it might be,’ he assured me, dropping into the adjacent folding chair. He held the slate out. ‘I’d hoped to make a little more progress today, but we’ll still be there by mid-afternoon.’

‘If nothing else goes wrong,’ I finished for him. Nevertheless, the news cheered me. Once we hit the supply dump, things would be a lot easier, at least for a time.

Kolfax nodded. ‘One good thing anyway,’ he pointed out. ‘This is a pretty good spot to set up camp. Better than the one I had in mind, at any rate.’ Which I suppose if you were determined to find a positive consequence of the day’s delays was some compensation at least. We were in a small side canyon a short distance from the trail, closed off at one end and narrow at the other. We could defend the place indefinitely if we had to.

‘There is that,’ I agreed, getting rid of him as quickly as possible after a few more questions about tomorrow’s leg of our journey. The best cure for my headache, I was sure, would be a good night’s sleep. I pulled the closure tab of my sleeping bag up to my head, trying to muffle the sounds around me, and recapture the sense of serenity I’d felt beneath the water of the oasis. I couldn’t, but eventually I slept.

Jurgen woke me just before dawn, my nose alerting me to his presence in my tent a moment before a tentative hand shook my shoulder.

‘Commissar. Are you awake?’

‘I am now,’ I assured him, letting go of the laspistol, which I had no conscious memory of having seized. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘Orks,’ he said simply. ‘Hundreds of ’em.’

As it turned out, that was something of an exaggeration, but it got me moving right enough, grabbing the comm-bead even ahead of my trousers.

‘Tayber,’ I snapped. ‘What’s going on?’ As I scrambled out into the open air, Jurgen at my heels, I already had a pretty good idea. The roar of badly tuned engines was echoing down the defile we’d taken the evening before, although whether they were in pursuit of us or heading in the opposite direction was impossible to determine.

‘There’s a column of vehicles moving up behind us,’ Tayber reported. Agitated civilians were milling around in the half light, bleating among themselves, although to my surprise a few of them were grabbing what improvised weapons they could and hurrying to reinforce the militia teams and Bravo squad, who were deploying at the mouth of the canyon. ‘Sentries

estimate a dozen or so.'

'Acknowledged,' I said, trying to ignore the flutter of apprehension in the pit of my stomach as I translated that into a round number of greenskins. Allowing for the worst possible permutations, that the sentries had underestimated by a vehicle or two and that they were all crowded to capacity, we could be facing anything up to a hundred and fifty fully armed ork warriors. I was under no illusions about our ability to take that many in a stand-up fight, but with the terrain on our side it might not come to that. The mouth of the canyon was a natural choke point, and we should be able to hold them off. I hoped...

Luskins and Jodril dropped into place behind a convenient rock, their single remaining missile poised to punch a hole through the first buggy incautious enough to poke its nose into our refuge, and I drew my chainsword, more by instinct than because I had anything to hand I could use it on. The gesture seemed to calm the crowd a little, though. They pulled back, staring at me, and I gestured towards the parked vehicles.

'Take cover,' I told them, adopting a calm, authoritative voice, and to my relief they began to comply. Good, at least that meant they were less likely to get caught in the crossfire and ruin our sight lines. As they did so, I caught sight of a couple of familiar figures running the opposite way to the rest of the militia, and moved to intercept them. 'Where the hell do you think you're going?'

'To get the truck,' Demara retorted. 'Our gun's bolted to it, remember?' I nodded. It was a fair point.

'Leave it where it is,' I told them. 'If the greenies break through, cover the civilians.' And, more to the point, give me some covering fire while I led the retreat. Tamworth nodded, the urge to serve and protect visibly kicking in at my words.

'You've got it. Come on, Dem.' He resumed his rapid progress towards the truck, the girl jogging a pace or two behind, her voice raised in remonstrance.

'I'm the gunner, you're the loader, I'm the one that says, "come on," all right?' I shook my head and sighed. It seemed their teamwork could still do with a little polish, but there was no time to worry about that now. I turned back to the incipient ambush, and brought Tayber and the three team leaders into the comm-net.

'Keep out of sight,' I said, flattening myself behind a convenient boulder,

steadying my laspistol against it. After a moment, Jurgen's distinctive odour joined me, followed an instant later by the man himself, who went prone and sighted his lasgun squarely on the gap in the cliff face surrounding us. 'Wait until they've committed themselves before opening fire.'

As ambushes went, I had to concede, it wasn't bad, especially considering the haste with which it had been put together. Once they rounded the edge of the opening, the greenskins would have a clear line of sight to the civilians, which ought to draw them in nicely, intent on slaughter, allowing us to pick them off from the flanks, especially if Luskins was able to stall their lead vehicle, breaking the momentum of the charge.

'Steady...' Tayber encouraged his men, and I heard the tinny echo of Hascom, Tarvil and Grenbow performing the same office for their recruits. My weapons felt glued to the palms of my hands, and the sweat there wasn't entirely due to the heat of the desert.⁶⁹ Any moment now...

'They're here,' Tarvil reported, his team having had the dubious honour of being deployed where they'd get the first sight of the enemy. 'Stay sharp.' Superfluous advice if ever I'd heard it, but it seemed to do the trick for his fledgling command, because no one got nervous and betrayed their presence by firing ahead of time. Which was just as well as it turned out. When I heard his voice again, it held an edge of puzzlement. 'Lead vehicle overshooting. And the second... They're not slowing down.'

'They've missed us,' I said, the sudden surge of released tension seeming to liquefy my bones.

'Seems like it.' Tayber's voice was shaded with an unmistakable tint of relief as well. 'But stay alert.'

In the event, his caution was to prove unfounded. The racket of the ork engines died away, and we finally relaxed, feeling a curious sense of anticlimax.

'How could they have missed our tracks?' I asked Kolfax, finding the stocky guide at my shoulder, and he shrugged.

'If they were going as fast as they sounded they'd be whipping up a fair-sized dustcloud,' he pointed out. 'They probably wiped them out for us.'

'Lucky they did,' Tayber agreed, joining my impromptu command group. 'The question is – how long have they been following us?' The palms of my hands began to tingle.

'The question is, have they?' I asked.

Tayber looked at me, unable or unwilling to complete the same chain of

reasoning I just had.

‘They must have been,’ he said, shrugging. ‘What else would they be after out here?’

‘The supply dump,’ I said.

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SEVENTEEN

Needless to say, the thought was a sobering one, and we resumed our journey in a far more subdued mood.

‘We can’t be certain that’s where they were heading,’ Tayber said when we stopped for our first break. We were pulled over in a small depression in the landscape, which would have kept the wind off, but not a lot else if we’d camped here the previous night as Kolfax had originally intended, and I shuddered inwardly at the narrowness of our escape. The ork convoy couldn’t possibly have missed us, and we’d have been faced with a pitched battle at the very least.

‘True,’ I agreed, neither of us really believing it, but determined to keep our fears at bay as best we could. There was no other obvious destination out here, but they were greenskins after all, so who knew what they might be after. For all I knew there was an encampment somewhere in the vicinity, like the one Jorgen and I had so fortuitously obliterated with our crash landing, which wasn’t exactly a comforting thought, but was marginally more so than the idea that the supplies we so desperately needed were even now disappearing down a few score of greenskin gullets. I turned to Kolfax, who was loitering nearby chewing a ration bar. Emperor preserve me, I was beginning to think he actually liked the things. ‘Still no sign of any tracks?’

‘None,’ he assured me, with a confident nod. ‘But then that’s hardly surprising.’ A gusty wind had been blowing for some hours, rolling successive waves of hot, thick air into my face (along with yet more of the ubiquitous dust), and I’d begun to feel as though I was being followed around by some vast, over friendly animal. ‘Apart from the dust we’re kicking up ourselves, there’s a blow coming.’

‘You mean a sandstorm?’ I asked, and our guide nodded his head.

‘Just a small one, should be over by dawn.’ Tayber and I looked at one another, the same thought occurring to both of us simultaneously. Orks or not, unless we found shelter at the supply dump we were in serious trouble. Ariott’s patients were unlikely to survive another night in the open even under reasonable conditions, and there was no telling how many of the others would succumb to the effects of bad weather too. More to the point, we needed to get the vehicles under cover. Robust they may have been, but an engine full of sand would cripple them, I had no doubt about that, and I couldn’t see Felicia and her artisans being able to fix the whole fleet.

‘Better get moving then,’ I concluded, draining the last of my water, and beginning to trudge back to the buggy. Tayber nodded.

‘Better had,’ he agreed.

The last couple of hours before we reached our destination were almost unbearably tense, my nerves winding tighter with every kilometre, like an internal echo of the ominous grey line building moment by moment along the horizon. Kolfax observed it periodically through his amplivisor, responding to my queries with infuriatingly vague predictions like, ‘It’s building, all right.’ So it was something of a shock when we finally crested a ridge, the truck in front of us coasted to a halt, and our guide stood up to point to something on the plain below.

‘That’s it,’ he said, his voice slightly attenuated by the comm-bead. Jurgen pulled us up too, next to the lead vehicle, and I raised my own amplivisor. ‘Looks like the greenies got here first.’

‘Not quite,’ I said. Our objective was plain enough, a cluster of prefabricated huts crudely camouflaged by having been half buried in the sand (unless of course the wind had taken care of that), protected in turn by a steep sided berm and a chain link fence. Tiny plumes of dust betrayed the presence of the orks who’d passed us that morning, circling the compound at speeds and ranges which both looked reckless in the extreme. Distance, and the ever-present racket of our engines, robbed the little tableau of sound, although occasional flashes of light from the hurtling vehicles and the beleaguered installation were enough to confirm that some kind of battle was going on. ‘Someone’s defending it.’

‘Any idea who?’ Tayber asked, cutting in. ‘They could just be squabbling over the loot.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said. ‘Whoever it is, we’re going in.’ I glanced back

at the ramshackle convoy behind me. 'Disembark the civilians, and tell them to find whatever shelter they can. We'll be back for them later.' I hoped. And if we weren't, they'd definitely have a better chance of survival on foot than riding into a firewasps' nest with us.

At that thought, I paused to consider the wisdom of my order, but I really couldn't see another choice. Moving on to the next supply dump was out of the question. We didn't have enough fuel to get there, even if by some miracle the approaching sandstorm didn't disable our transport first. Our only chance was to drive off the orks and hope that whoever was defending the installation below us would turn out to be on our side. Ignoring the chill of apprehension, which seemed to have settled in the pit of my stomach, I continued to lay out our strategy.

'Once we're over the ridge,' I said, 'Head straight for the main mass of the enemy. Engage at will.' In other words, use their own tactics against them, and hope they were too surprised to respond, at least until we'd taken a few of them out. 'Don't fire until we're right on top of them. With any luck they'll think we're reinforcements until it's too late.' Not exactly the soundest of plans, but no one had any better ideas, or objections (apart from a few of the civilians who seemed less than thrilled at the prospect of being abandoned in the middle of nowhere, but responded well to reason and the threat of execution), so against my better judgement I waved our *ad hoc* attack force forward and ordered the charge.

Truth to tell, the experience was unexpectedly exhilarating. As we accelerated down the slope, raising a huge cloud of dust as we did so, I distinctly heard several of our militia recruits whooping like greenskins themselves, even over the racket of the engines.

I felt a faint flutter of trepidation as I registered the banner of flying grit we were trailing in our wake, which pretty much ruled out any element of surprise we might otherwise have retained. I just had to hope it would even the balance a little by cloaking our identities until we were ready to strike. There was no time to worry about that, though; the greenskins were getting closer by the second, and I voxed the others with a last-minute warning.

'Hold your fire until you're sure of a target,' I reminded them. 'And make it count. We'll only get one chance at this, and if we frak it up things will get messy.' I was rewarded with a chorus of assent and took up my station at the heavy bolter, trying to compensate for the wildly bucking firing platform I was to be stuck with. A buggy with a garish red paint scheme

bobbed and weaved through the sights of the weapon, and I swung the mount, trying to keep it centred.

‘Commissar.’ Felicia’s voice echoed tinnily in my comm-bead. ‘I’m picking up some signals. They’re very faint...’

‘Patch them through,’ I told her. A haze of static filled my ear, interwoven with fragments of several voices, none of them intelligible. ‘It sounds like another comm-net.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ the tech-priest confirmed. Well that was a relief; at least whoever was in the supply dump was human. ‘I’m trying to break into it, but this particular blessed gift of the Omnissiah is well and truly fr—.’

‘Keep trying,’ I said, just as a gout of sand erupted a few metres to the left of our hurtling buggy. Jurgen began swinging us around in an evasive pattern, which I lost no time in urging the rest of our group to emulate.

‘Looks like the greenies have spotted us, sir,’ he said.

‘Greenies be damned,’ I replied furiously, spotting a puff of smoke from behind the berm. ‘It’s our own people!’ Who, to be fair, could hardly be blamed for making the same mistake we hoped the orks would. I clung desperately to the bolter mounting as Jurgen side slipped around the burning wreck of something which looked uncomfortably like the vehicle we were riding in, and another piece of the desert erupted, close enough to shower me with debris this time. ‘And they’ve got the range, damn it!’ Now it could only be a matter of seconds before the concealed mortars did some real damage to us. ‘Felicia, I need that frequency!’

‘Working on it,’ she said cheerfully, but then I supposed she would be, sitting comfortably back on the ridge enjoying the show.

‘Tullock, target the reinforcements,’ a new voice suddenly said in my ear, crisp and confident. ‘Whittle them down before they can close. Everyone else keep the pressure up on the first wave.’ Whoever it was clearly knew their business.

‘You got it, LT.’⁷⁰ someone responded, presumably Tullock, whoever the hell he was. I cut in immediately, seldom more grateful for my commissarial override.

‘This is Commissar Ciaphas Cain, leading the convoy approaching from the east,’ I broadcast. Glancing around, I realised with a thrill of horror that it was actually true, Jurgen’s habitually robust driving style having drawn us slightly ahead of the others, who were now fanning out across the plain towards the greenskins. ‘We’re carrying Imperial troops and civilian

refugees in commandeered enemy vehicles. Concentrate your fire on the orks between us.'

'Prove it.' The unnamed lieutenant was clearly going to be as hard to convince as Tayber had been, but at least he held back the blizzard of mortar rounds I'd been convinced was about to descend on us.

'We're about to,' I promised him, and targeted the crimson buggy again. If nothing else, Tullock's potshots at us seemed to have convinced the greenskins that we were indeed on their side, an illusion I'd be most gratified to dispel. 'Select your targets.' A chorus of acknowledgement assured me that the rest of our gallant band had already done so, and I squeezed the trigger.

We were close enough for me to make out the crew of the ramshackle vehicle, a couple of brawny greenskins, one driving and the other hanging off the mount of a heavy weapon of some kind, directing a stream of unaimed fire in the general direction of the dug-in defenders. As he turned to face me, noticing us at last, I was able to discern that his entire lower jaw had been replaced by a crude augmetic of riveted metal. I squeezed the trigger, and by luck or the Emperor's guidance, the stream of explosive shells shredded his torso, which bounced to the sand in a welter of offal and gore. The driver reacted instantly, swinging into our path and attempting to ram us.

'Oh no you don't!' Jurgen braked hard, almost knocking me out against the hard surface of the bolter, but years of experience of his driving style had forewarned me of what to expect and I cushioned the impact with the flat of my hand, directing a hail of bolts into the now-unoccupied rear compartment. As I'd hoped, there must have been some spare ammunition or a fuel can in the back, as the whole thing suddenly erupted in a ball of fire. Startled, the driver lost control and spun out, the blazing wreck pinwheeling away until it impacted with a sand dune. Jurgen swung us around in a wider arc, looking for another target.

Our surprise attack had been a stunning success, no fewer than four of the enemy trucks and buggies falling to our initial salvoes, and the rest scattering in shock. To my relief, only a couple of the larger trucks had troops on board, and one of those was disabled, its occupants scrambling away from it, brandishing their small-arms. A few rounds pattered ineffectually off our armour plate, and I ignored them, knowing better than to waste ammunition trying to suppress orks. It was as well I held my fire,

though, because an instant later one of our own trucks roared through the middle of the group, squashing a couple of greenskins under its wheels while Grenbow's militia group took potshots at the rest with their own weapons. (This didn't do much beyond confusing them even more, never hard to do with an ork, but at least it kept them from regrouping.)

'Heads up, commissar!' Grenbow called, forgetting in his excitement that the comm-bead mike was right next to his mouth, and almost deafening me in the process. Fortunately, Jurgen was less easily disconcerted, turning us aside with another spine-snapping jerk just as a hail of heavy calibre ammunition began to rattle against the armour plate protecting my firing position. I turned, seeking a target, to find a trio of the bike things bearing down on us, autocannons or something similar strobing as they spat death in our direction.

I opened up at almost the same instant as the heavy weapon on the truck, catching a glimpse of Demara clinging grimly to the wildly bucking cannon as she tried to keep it on aim, Tamworth slamming another belt of ammunition in, and a white, flapping robe apparently anchored firmly to the tailgate.

'Felicia!' I yelled. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

'Keeping the comms open, I thought.' She gave me a cheery wave as the bucking truck moved in to parallel our course, held in place by the mechadendrite, which she'd wrapped around a convenient stanchion. 'How else do you think I got us in range of the other network?'

There was no time to debate the matter further, as the ork bikes were closing fast, their riders hunched low over their handlebars. The leader, who was broad and muscular even for an ork, grinned wildly as we approached, the horns of some large animal strapped to the front of his helmet.⁷¹ An instant later, the grin was gone, along with most of his bike, which seemed to disintegrate under him as Demara finally got her autocannon under control. The open vox-relay picked up her voice.

'Wahoo! I got one!'

'Great,' I responded. 'Don't get cocky.' I directed the bolter at the closer of the remaining two, taking out the front wheel. The hurtling contraption buried its forks in the sand, flipping over completely, and crushing its rider under its own weight.

'Mine,' Jurgen said, as though claiming a catch on the grasshopper pitch.⁷² Before I could divine his intention, he swung the control yoke again,

ramming the remaining bike, and bouncing us over the wreckage of the thing. Driven deep into the sand by the weight of our wheels, its rear tracks continued to spin for a moment, and a pair of legs kicked feebly, waving incongruously in the air as though their owner was attempting to run upside down. An instant later the truck followed, reducing what was left to scrap metal and goo.

We weren't getting everything our own way, though. Glancing round I saw one of our own buggies upended, its crew scattered around it unmoving, or twitching feebly. As I watched, one of them tried to rise, only to be bisected by one of the murderous axes being wielded by a greenskin, a stray foot soldier from their wrecked truck by the look of it.

'Help the survivors!' I voxed Grenbow, and the truck peeled off to do what it could. I switched frequencies, getting back to the anonymous lieutenant. 'Convinced yet?'

'Reasonably.'

The other ork truck slewed sideways, a neat hole punched through its side armour, the spray of molten metal spattering its unfortunate crew the unmistakable result of an energy weapon of some kind. I turned, seeing the familiar silhouette of an Imperial Chimera looming over a nearby sand dune, the multi-laser in its turret turning to track its target. 'Thanks for keeping them busy, by the way.' The laser flashed again, cooking off the fuel tank, and the truck erupted in a fireball. Two more Chimeras rolled into view, their multi-lasers stabbing out to pick off targets of their own, and I realised with a sudden surge of relief that all the ork vehicles I could now see were the survivors of our own convoy. Apart from the one I'd seen overturned, we hadn't lost any, and our casualties seemed at first glance to have been astonishingly light.

'Our pleasure,' I said dryly as Jurgen cut the power and coasted us to a halt in front of the command vehicle, easily distinguishable from its fellows by the cluster of vox antennae atop its hull. It came to a halt as well, its engine idling, while its fellows continued to roll forward, their hull-mounted heavy flamers licking out to mop up the scattering greenskin survivors trying to flee on foot. Not many were making it, and so far as I could see our armed civilians, who no doubt welcomed the opportunity for a little payback, were enthusiastically dealing with the ones avoiding the flamers. I climbed down and walked towards the stationary Chimera, straightening my cap and returning my dust encrusted sash to my waist as I did so. 'And you are?'

‘Lieutenant Piers.’ The turret hatch popped open, and a surprisingly young-looking man in a PDF uniform stared down at me. ‘I must say, you’re not quite what I expected when you said you were a commissar.’

‘I’ve been busy,’ I said shortly. I gestured back at the ridge. ‘We left our non-combatants a couple of kilometres back that way. Send someone to pick them up, will you?’ As I’d expected, a show of concern for the civilians was enough to short-circuit any arguments he might have made. He still looked confused, and who could blame him, but he nodded in agreement.

‘I’ll see to it,’ he promised. His eyes widened as he got his first proper look at the vehicles we’d appropriated and the piratical band of irregulars manning them, and positively boggled as Jurgen hopped down from the buggy to take up his usual position at my shoulder. ‘Is there anything else I can do for you?’

‘I don’t suppose you’ve got any tanna?’ I asked hopefully. Piers shook his head.

‘Never heard of it,’ he said.

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EIGHTEEN

Well, they might not have had any tanna, but they had pretty much everything else I could have wished for, including showers and air conditioning. I was still basking in the unfamiliar sensation of comfort an hour or so later, feeling clean, cool, and savouring the mug of recaf Jurgen had found for me, as I sat at a table in one of the huts filling Piers in on our journey so far. The faint rattle of the sandstorm against the walls was also quietly soothing in its own way, despite being a tangible reminder that we'd only just reached safety.

'You really think you can make it all the way through?' he asked.

I nodded. 'I wouldn't be doing it otherwise,' I said, skating over the self-evident fact that a large proportion of my impromptu escort wasn't likely to prove so fortunate. I nodded at the mapslate, propped up between us. 'There are two more supply dumps between here and the lowlands. After that, we can live off the land if we have to, although we'll still need to stock up on fuel and ammunition.'

'We will.' Piers nodded, already taking it for granted that he'd be tagging along on our little expedition, a fact which I was more than grateful for. I'd been expecting to have to persuade him, possibly even by exerting my commissarial authority, but for whatever reason, the notion of taking on the bulk of the greenskin army almost single-handed seemed to appeal to him. I didn't question it at the time, just thanked the Emperor for gung-ho idiots, and got on with the practicalities. For some reason, I found myself liking the lad, probably because he reminded me of Divas.

'What have you been doing all this time?' Tayber asked. He was sitting in on the discussion mainly so I didn't have to waste time briefing him later, but he was the ranking trooper in the convoy, so I'd also felt it might be

politic to include him. Besides, he hadn't let me down so far (unless you counted landing me with a gaggle of civvies to wet-nurse), and Piers was still something of an unknown quantity; it wouldn't hurt to have the veteran sergeant there to back me up if push came to shove.

'The same as you, by the sound of it,' Piers said. 'After our regiment was overrun, we went to ground, and started hit-and-run strikes against whatever targets we could find.'

Tayber nodded. That had been the last coherent order to get through before the chain of command had collapsed completely, or so he'd told me shortly after we'd met. 'We came by here to rearm and re-supply yesterday, and got caught flat-footed when the greenies found the place.' He manipulated the controls of the mapslate, and the icon marking the supply dump turned red. 'We'll have to blow what's left when we pull out, unfortunately. Now they know where it is, they'll be back.'

I nodded. The reason for his eagerness to join us now abundantly clear: he was evidently as fervent a believer in the notion of safety in numbers as I was. I couldn't fault his reasoning either; I didn't think any greenskin survivors had got away from the skirmish outside, but when they didn't check in, whoever sent them would be bound to send more, and in greater numbers.

'They seemed to know where they were going when they passed us,' Tayber said.

I looked quizzically at Piers. 'Any idea why that would be?'

The young lieutenant shrugged. 'They found a map?' he suggested. 'Perhaps one of the other units that used the place wasn't as lucky as we were.'

'Other units?' I asked.

'This is the third time we've been here,' Piers replied. 'When I booked out what we'd taken, I noticed there'd been some other requisitions in the last month or so.' Wonderful – their entire society was falling down around their ears, and what was left of the PDF was still filling out forms.

'Show me,' I said.

It took a while, but after a bit of searching and some shouting down the corridor, Piers's sergeant, a large, taciturn man called Vyner, appeared with a slate which he laid on the table between us. Piers fiddled around with it, and called up a screen full of what looked like standard requisition forms.

'There. That was us.' He pointed to a couple of items. 'Looks to me like

three more units active in this area.' He glanced up at Tayber appraisingly. 'Four, counting yours.'

'We found all we needed in town,' Tayber replied.

'So I see.' The young lieutenant grinned. 'Very obliging of the greenies to let you borrow it.'

'Any indication of what these units are?' I asked.

Piers shook his head. 'None, it's all encrypted. Security, you see. In case the enemy takes the installation. That way they still won't know what's out there.' I nodded slowly. Maybe Felicia could do something with it, or not. In any case, once the sandstorm subsided there would be a far more direct way of finding out.

'I need to talk to your vox man,' I said.

By dawn, the sandstorm had almost dissipated (just as Kolfax had predicted, much to his ill-concealed satisfaction), and I braved the flurry of stinging grit to inspect the site properly. The largest of the huts contained food and water, which I left Norbert to organise the distribution of, and I moved on to find Felicia and the remaining vehicles with a considerably lighter heart. Even if we were able to supplement our numbers with fresh recruits, we'd still have enough of the essentials to keep us going more or less indefinitely. Assuming there was a supply of fuel around the place too, of course.

'Barrels of the stuff,' the comely tech-priest reassured me. 'Omniissiah alone knows how we'll get it all stowed, but we'll manage.' She led me to a shed with a large door in the side, a strange air of anticipation hovering around her. 'This ought to help.' She flicked the portal aside with a casual wave of her mechadendrite, leaving the weathered timber quivering against its stop. A couple of Piers's troopers popped up like startled sump rats at the noise, lasguns levelled, then relaxed when they saw it was only us. I nodded courteously at them, pleased at their level of alertness, and turned to look at whatever it was in the shed that Felicia was so excited about.

'It's a Sentinel!' I said in astonishment.

The enginseer smiled. 'Better than that,' she said, activating the overhead luminators. 'It's a power lifter.' I'd seen them before of course, many times, but they still seemed faintly odd to me. Instead of weapons, the walker had been equipped with a set of mechanical claws, intended to let it pick up and handle heavy loads, and a massive counterweight hung from its back like a

rockcrete rucksack. 'Once I get this up and running we'll have everything stowed in no time.'

There was no point in asking who she expected to pilot the thing, she was gazing at it adoringly and I made a mental note to find urgent business elsewhere in the compound as soon as she started mucking about with it.

'Glad to hear it,' I said. 'How are the vehicles?'

'Good as ever,' she said, whatever that meant considering they were ork junk to begin with. 'We got them under cover just in time. Aldiman and Lyddi are checking them out at the moment.' After a moment's thought I realised she was referring to her artisans, who, it appeared, had progressed a little beyond mere bolt tightening. (Indeed, by the time our journey was over they'd both sprouted cogwheel icons, and seemed to think they were engineers in all but name.⁷³)

'What about the Imperial stuff?' I asked.

Felicia shrugged, visibly reluctant to wrest her attention away from her new toy.

'We've got five Chimeras, all of them in pretty good condition considering what they've been through. They could do with some routine maintenance, but that isn't an option right now.' She shrugged, the mechadendrite twitching above her shoulder as she did so. 'I gather time is of the essence.'

'It is,' I assured her. 'We're going to have to pull out of here by tomorrow morning at the latest.'

After some discussion, Piers, Tayber and I had determined that the nearest known concentration of orks could reasonably expect their scouts to be returning by about noon today, and ought to be turning up around dawn if they set out at once to find out what had happened to them. Neither of which was necessarily a correct assumption, of course, but under the circumstances none of us were willing to take any chances. 'Can you get the place gutted by then?'

'Oh yes,' she said, with rather too much enthusiasm for my peace of mind, and I went to find Piers's vox-operator before she could get the power lifter started.

He was a thin, sallow fellow as I recall, waiting for me at the exit ramp of the command Chimera as arranged, clearly wondering if he was supposed to salute a commissar or not. In the end he compromised with a sort of limp wave, which I returned with a parade ground snap and enough of a friendly grin to put him at his ease.

‘Everything’s ready,’ he assured me and ushered me out of the dwindling wind into the welcoming shelter of the APC. It was a little more cramped in there than a standard model, in order to make room for the auspex and the extra communications gear, to which Marquony, the vox man, ushered me. I’d been inside Mostrue’s command vehicle on enough occasions to be familiar with the layout of one, although there were a few minor differences of course, and sat next to him with complete assurance. ‘Anyone in range ought to be listening out in about two minutes.’ Another standing order left over from the invasion, and a pretty handy one for me I have to say. With the full power of a command Chimera’s transmitter behind us I should be able to reach any potential allies across a far wider radius than was possible with the portable vox unit Grenbow had carried (which Felicia had now laid to rest, along with the appropriate sacraments).

‘Thank you,’ I said, inputting my commissarial code as I spoke. Given the scepticism I’d encountered from Tayber and Piers, tagging the message with the full authority of my office from the outset might save us a lot of argument. Marquony glanced at his chronograph, fiddled with some dials and switches, and nodded at me.

‘You’re on.’

‘This is Commissar Ciaphas Cain, for all Imperial units within range,’ I said, trying to imbue my voice with the easy expectation of obedience they taught me at the schola. ‘Rendezvous at supply post sigma twelve by dawn tomorrow. Message ends.’ I nodded at Marquony, who cut the power at once. We listened to the static for a good twenty minutes, but no answer came, not even the odd, ‘Did you say commissar?’ I half expected.

Marquony grinned at me. ‘Good vox discipline,’ he said. ‘Less for the greenies to pick up.’

‘Either that, or there’s nobody out there,’ I said, trying to sound as if I was joking.

In the event, my fears were to prove unfounded. Our first batch of stragglers arrived shortly before noon, adding another pair of Chimeras and over a dozen troopers to our motley band. That gave us almost a full-strength platoon, once you’d added in the survivors of Piers’s unit as well, not to mention at least one Chimera we could use almost exclusively for transporting our supplies. I left the sergeant in charge of the newcomers, to sort out the practicalities of integrating the command chains with Piers and

Tayber, and went to find another mug of recaf.

In the event, I found Norbert too, who'd evidently had the same idea, and who joined me at my table.

'That was a stroke of luck,' he said, spinning his data slate around so I could see it. 'I've been able to allocate part of our fuel reserves and spare ammunition to an armoured vehicle. Rather less chance of it getting touched off by a stray round that way.'

It was a risky call – one good hit by a krak round or an energy weapon and we'd lose the lot, but the greenskins seemed fairly light on both. It would certainly be safer than putting most of our volatile material into one of the open-topped ork contraptions.

'What about the rest?' I asked.

The scrivener shrugged. 'I'm dividing them up between the trucks and a couple of the buggies. Spread out as much as possible. Even if we lose one or two in the next encounter we won't be crippled.' He didn't sound altogether sanguine at the prospect, but I couldn't really blame him. 'Even so, we'll need to leave some items behind. We still don't have the capacity to transport all of it.'

'I'm sure you have everything under control,' I said.

'I've drawn up a list of priorities,' he said. 'Food, water, and medical supplies, of course, and enough ammunition to keep our weapons functional.' He indicated some items on the inventory he'd compiled. 'Some of the militiamen are asking for new guns, to replace the ork stuff they're carrying.'

'Tell them to take whatever they want,' I said. 'There's enough in the armoury.' And the more we issued, the less we had to pack: I was damned if I was going to leave anything the greenskins could use behind, and it went against the grain to blow up anything we might need later. Besides, the guns we'd taken from the greenskins were likely to be just as lethal to the user as the target.

'I'll do that.' Norbert nodded. 'What about the rest of the civilians?'

I shrugged. 'Why not?' Carrying a weapon would make them feel more secure, I had no doubt about that, and aiming wasn't exactly an option from the back of one of those juddering ork monstrosities in any case. 'Anyone who wants to can arm themselves. Provided they let one of Tayber's men show them how to use their weapon, and are willing to follow orders once the shooting starts.' That should keep most of them from blowing their own

feet off, and stick a bit more cannon fodder between the orks and me if things got really desperate.

‘Sounds reasonable,’ Norbert agreed.

Well, I suppose in retrospect I’ve had better ideas, but it seemed to put fresh heart into the refugees, and in the end almost all of them picked up a lasgun or something similar, cementing their status as part of our growing irregular army. Even Ariott was carrying a laspistol the next time I saw him, although he assured me he had no intention of actually using it. I’d been a little concerned that the regular PDF might look somewhat askance at this development, but it seemed they were all for it. If the civilians could look after themselves, they could concentrate on taking the battle to the enemy without being distracted, or so they seemed to think, and I found more than one trooper offering to give personal shooting lessons to one of the women in our convoy, which I suppose was a sign of improving morale all round.

In fact, the whole encampment soon developed an air of purpose that I found quite surprising, until I had another chat with Piers over a salt grox roll and a mug of recaf shortly before dusk. By that time, a few more stragglers had turned up, bringing with them a couple of heavy trucks, which had Norbert practically rubbing his hands together, a trio of Salamanders (scout-pattern), together with a full set of crewmen, and a Chimera fitted out as a medevac vehicle. I directed that, and the two corpsmen driving it, to Ariott and his casualties, who would be far more comfortable aboard it than in the greenskin rattletrap they’d been condemned to hitherto.

‘None of us have felt like this since the greenies arrived,’ the young lieutenant said, taking a bite out of his roll. He glanced across at me, chewing furiously for a moment with a peculiar expression on his face. ‘We’ve just been surviving, that’s all. But now we have a mission again.’

‘The mission’s the same as it’s always been,’ I told him. ‘Cleanse this world of the orks.’

‘That’s easy for you to say.’ Piers took a slug of his recaf, recoiling slightly as Jurgen stepped forward to replenish his mug. ‘This is just another campaign to you. But the people here have lost everything they ever had.’

‘Except for their fighting spirit,’ I said, slipping easily into the role the Commissariat had gone to so much trouble to prepare me for. ‘And that’s

what'll win their world back for them.' And keep me in one piece, I sincerely hoped.

Piers nodded, buying it wholesale. 'We will, too,' he said solemnly. 'Or die trying.' He raised his voice, which echoed across the space between the huts, even above the bustle of people, troopers and irregulars alike, hurrying to and fro with boxes and bundles for the vehicles. 'Today's the day we stop running and hiding. Today's the day we stop harassing the enemy, and start to hurt them. Today's the day the greenskins start being afraid of us!' A roar of approbation erupted from threescore throats, echoing from the high-sided structures all around us. I stepped back into the shadows, content to let the Perlans have their little moment. Emperor knew it was going to be hard enough once we resumed our journey.

'Gangway! Oh, it's you. Sorry.' Demara stepped around me, her arms wrapped round a squad support autocannon, which was almost as big as she was. Tamworth was a few paces behind, the tripod and crew shield slung across his back, ammunition boxes in both hands. A strange amalgam of truculence and grudging respect flickered across the girl's face. 'Am I supposed to say "sir"?''

'It's customary,' I said. 'But I'm not exactly a stickler for the formalities.'

'We'd gathered that, sir,' Tamworth said.

Demara nodded. 'Thanks for saying we could take stuff.' A flicker of doubt entered her eyes. 'You didn't just mean the rifles and things, did you?'

'Whatever you're comfortable with,' I assured her.

'Chill.' She glanced up at Tamworth. 'See? I said it would be all right.' She returned her attention to me. 'Tam said we were only supposed to take the little stuff.' She glanced at the heavy weapon in her arms as fondly as if it had been a gryn timer. 'But I said the moment I saw it, *this* is a gun.'

'Have fun with it,' I said.

The two of them grinned at me, and trotted off into the gathering darkness. A moment later, the power lifter stalked round the side of the nearest building and came to a halt with a hiss of pistons, a box almost as large as I was dangling casually from its claws. Felicia grinned at me, her white robe making her look like a cheerful ghost in the gathering darkness.

'This is just about the last of it,' she told me. 'Everything we can use, anyway.'

'Good.' I nodded. 'What's left?'

‘Shells, mostly, but we’ve nothing to fire them with.’ Her grin widened. ‘Should make quite a bang when we blow the place, though.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ I said. ‘How are the vehicles?’

‘Good enough.’ She nodded. ‘I’ll run some final checks overnight.’ Her energy astonished me at the time; it was only later that I discovered, like many tech-priests, she’d had part of her cerebellum replaced with augmetic systems which, among other things, let her go without sleep almost indefinitely. ‘And if I can find the time I’ve got some ideas about this thing.’

‘You’re taking it with us?’ I asked, astonished.

‘Oh yes. It might be a glorified shelf-stacker, but it’s built on a Sentinel chassis, don’t forget.’ Her voice took on an unmistakable edge of enthusiasm. ‘It’ll be a lot faster and more manoeuvrable over rough terrain than a Chimera.’ She hoisted the claw in a form of salute, making me flinch as I anticipated the box crashing down at my feet, but it remained in place as she spun the mechanical limb dexterously. ‘And this ought to come in handy if anything gets stuck.’

‘Good point,’ I said, standing aside to let her past. I turned to Jurgen. ‘We might as well turn in,’ I said.

My aide nodded. ‘Busy day ahead tomorrow, sir,’ he agreed. Although if I’d known how much of an understatement that was going to turn out to be, I wouldn’t have slept a wink.



NINETEEN

Despite our best intentions, it was well past dawn before our motley collection of vehicles was ready to roll, and I hid my impatience as best I could while the civilians sorted themselves out. The last few precious supplies were hung from the sides of Chimeras already so encrusted with external stowage that their anti-personnel lasguns would be all but useless, and Tayber made ready to blow the place halfway to the Golden Throne. We'd placed demo charges in every building, with a couple of extra det packs wired up to the remaining ammunition in the armoury just for luck, and I intended being a long way away before letting him transmit the vox pulse which would touch it all off.

'That's the last of it,' he reported eventually, trotting up to the command Chimera, where Jurgen and I were settling in with Piers and the remains of his command squad. Normally I'd have followed my usual habit and requisitioned one of the Salamanders, but I'd had enough of riding in an open vehicle in these conditions. They were better employed doing the job they'd been designed for: ranging ahead of us and out to our flanks, keeping an eye open for any unpleasant surprises. They'd been doing that since dawn, checking in periodically to assure me that there was still no sign of the greenskins, although I wasn't about to let that lull me into a false sense of security. Since arriving on Perlia I'd learned to trust my paranoid streak more firmly than ever.

Besides, the command vehicle would be right in the middle of our improvised army, as well protected as possible. I hadn't told Piers that was why I was hitching a lift, citing the need to keep on top of any unexpected developments, which the array of specialised vox and auspex equipment aboard would be invaluable with. The fact that I could have done so almost

as easily through the comm-bead, while eating dust in the back of our old ork boneshaker didn't seem to have occurred to him, and if it had he kept the thought to himself.

'Good,' I responded, with a last glance at our ragtag convoy. What with the mixture of ork and Imperial vehicles, all so overloaded with external stowage that their outlines were barely discernible, we looked more like a bunch of scavvies than a military unit.

I was about to give the signal to move out when the familiar hiss of pistons and clanking of camshafts alerted me to the presence of the power lifter. I turned, receiving a typically cheery wave from Felicia as she leaned out of the cockpit, and goggled in astonishment.

'Emperor on Earth,' I expostulated, 'what have you done to that?'

'I told you I had some ideas.' Her voice was conversational, echoing in the comm-bead in my ear, which was just as well I suppose, as I'd never have heard a word over the roaring of the engines building up around us otherwise. One of the ideas had evidently been the installation of a vox set.

In place of the rockcrete counterweight, she'd mounted a large metal tank, which was full of promethium judging by the tangle of piping which led from it to somewhere within the bowels of the machine. With that much fuel on board she ought to be able to make it to the coast without stopping, although she clearly intended using some of it for other purposes: a heavy flamer had been mounted on the Sentinel's snout, its igniter hissing gently, flavouring the air with a light tang of combustion. How in the galaxy she expected to be able to use it, the panel in the cockpit normally reserved for fire control being devoted to the manipulation of the claws, I had no idea. It was only some time later, when I saw her wading into the middle of a greenskin patrol with every sign of enjoyment, that I realised she'd jury-rigged a manual trigger which she could activate with her mechanical tail.

'Very resourceful,' I told her, keeping my voice as neutral as possible.

Felicia grinned again, and clanked off in search of her artisans, who had commandeered one of the newly arrived trucks for their collection of tools and spare parts (now comfortably well supplemented by the inventory of the supply dump). I turned to Piers. 'We might as well move out.'

'Outrider two,' a voice said in my ear. 'Contact, south-east quadrant, closing fast.' One of the Salamander teams was doing what it was supposed to. Piers looked grim.

'They were quick off the mark,' he said. I nodded, the dryness of my

mouth not entirely due to the desiccating heat and the stink of burned promethium diffusing from the engines of our vehicles like Jurgen's body odour. It seemed our most pessimistic forecast of the ork response to the massacre of their reconnaissance patrol was about to be borne out.

I hurried into the shadowed interior of the command Chimera, a detached corner of my mind still able to welcome the sudden coolness, and stood over the auspex operator.

'Can you give me an estimate of their numbers?' I asked. The man, Orrily by name if I remember right, shook his head.

'They're not in range yet,' he explained, and indicated a blip almost at the edge of the screen, comfortingly tagged with an Imperial icon. 'That's outrider two.'

'This is Cain,' I transmitted, cutting in over Marquony's routine acknowledgement of the incoming message. 'Have you got a visual?'

'No, sir.' The corporal in charge of the four-man scout team responded instantly, no doubt surprised at my intervention and hoping to make a good impression. 'All we can make out so far is the dust they're kicking up.' There was a pause, and I could picture him staring through his amplivisor trying to resolve the image. 'There's a lot of it, though.'

'Let us know as soon as you've got confirmation,' I said. I turned to Piers and Tayber. 'It's decision time. Stay and hope we can defend our position, or pull out now and risk engaging them in the open if they pursue.'

'Pull out,' Piers said. He indicated the auspex screen. 'They're at least twenty minutes away.' Tayber nodded his agreement.

'We were going to blow this place anyway. Pull back to the ridge line while we've still got enough time.'

'Have we, though?' I asked. Our military units could do it, I had no doubt about that, but whether the civilian rabble would be able to get their act together in time was far more debatable. The question was merely rhetorical, however, intended to show some concern for the refugees. I wasn't going to sit around here waiting for the greenskins to arrive, and if some of the civvies ended up acting as a shield for the rest of us I could live with that. So I nodded, as though making a hard decision. 'It's not as if we really have a choice, is it? Let's go.'

To my surprise, the retreat from the supply dump went remarkably well, at least at first. The civilians were able to keep up with the rest of us, despite being mounted on the ork vehicles for the most part, and although the

formation dispersed a bit, our Chimeras were able to keep them more or less reined in. My main concern had been the choke point of the main gate, the only way of getting through the berm around the compound, but everything was out on the plain and kicking up dust within little more than ten minutes.

‘I’ve got the contact,’ Orrily told me shortly after we’d lurched into motion ourselves. ‘One vehicle, medium sized. I can’t tell a lot more at this distance.’

‘That’s good enough,’ I told him, trying to hide my relief. Whatever it was, it didn’t seem all that much of a threat. A moment later, the Salamander crew chimed in, confirming his estimate.

‘It’s Imperial,’ the corporal told me. ‘One Leman Russ.’ He paused for a moment, then his voice resumed. ‘It’s leading some kind of convoy, by the look of things. There’s a much bigger dust cloud behind it, trailing by a couple of kilometres.’

‘Leading be reamed,’ a new voice cut in, crisp, authoritative, and undeniably female. ‘We’ve got greenies up our arse. Whoever’s out there, you’d better have some serious firepower or we’re flamebread.’

‘This is Commissar Cain,’ I responded, trying to hide the shiver of unease I felt at those words. ‘Identify yourself, please.’ The hint of formality would be subtly reassuring, and there was no point in being rude in any case. I’ve always found you get more out of people by making them feel as though you respect them, and if it doesn’t work out you can always shoot them later.

‘Sergeant Vivica Sautine, 57th armoured. We’re all that’s left of it, so far as I know.⁷⁴ We’re out of ammunition for all our weapon systems. We pulled in to re-supply at alpha seven yesterday, and found it crawling with greenskins.’

I shot a glance at Tayber, recognising the designation of the supply dump he’d urged us to make for instead of this one, but had the grace to refrain from saying ‘I told you so.’

‘We’ve been running ever since,’ Sautine continued. ‘I thought we’d shaken them, but they picked up our trail at first light.’

‘Bypass the dump,’ I told her, hoping the greenskins weren’t monitoring our vox channels. ‘Rendezvous with us on the ridge.’

‘Haven’t you been listening?’ she responded, with an edge of asperity I could only ascribe to the stress she’d been under and the PDF’s usual

woeful ignorance of the powers of the Commissariat. 'We're completely dry. If we don't re-arm we're down to harsh language.'

'They're ten minutes behind you,' I pointed out, glancing at Orrily for confirmation of my estimate. He nodded. 'Unless you can get re-equipped that fast, the compound's a death trap,' I concluded, unwilling to spell out the measures we'd taken to keep the remaining ordnance out of ork hands in case our communications were compromised. Sautine was evidently bright enough to join the dots, though.

'Confirm that,' she said. I returned my attention to Orrily, and the luminescent rash speckling his auspex screen. Something about it struck me as subtly awry, although I couldn't quite put my finger on it. After a moment the coin dropped, and I pointed at one of the blips.

'Why's that unit moving the wrong way?' I asked. Whatever it was, it was fast and agile, snaking its way through the mass of vehicles with an ease and speed, which ruled out most of our makeshift company. It had to be the Sentinel, I concluded, an impression, which was borne out a moment later by a cheerful hail over the vox.

'Don't worry, Ciaphas, I'll take care of it.'⁷⁵

'Take care of what?' I asked, already dreading the answer. As ever, Felicia's voice was redolent of the casual optimism I'd come to associate with her.

'I've got plenty of time to get in and out of the armoury,' she assured me. 'We didn't pack any shells, did we?'

'Get back in formation,' I said as authoritatively as I could, while making sure all the other vox links had been cut out of the circuit. I couldn't risk what amounted to a direct challenge to my leadership being noticed by anyone else.

Felicia laughed. 'That's the idea, just as soon as I've picked up some shells for the tank lady. We've already got enough ammo for her bolters, and some lascannon powerpacks.'

The rogue blip was well clear of the rest of the convoy, and closer to the compound than it was to the safety of the ridge. I calculated the timing. If everything kept going at the same speed, she should be in and out by the time the fleeing tank reached the supply dump, and the two of them could reach safety together. I hoped. We didn't have anything capable of giving them covering fire from this range, and I found myself wishing for an Earthshaker or two. (Or preferably a Basilisk, which could have done the

same job and kept up with us as well.)

‘Confirm that,’ I said, bowing to the inevitable. There was nothing I could do to dissuade her, so I might as well give the impression that I’d sanctioned her actions. That’s the trouble with civilians: they keep having ideas of their own instead of doing what they’re told. I switched to another channel. ‘Tayber,’ I said. ‘Hold detonation until ordered.’

‘Yes, sir.’ His voice over the vox-link was faintly puzzled, but disciplined for all that. Behind it I could hear the growling of the Chimera that Bravo squad were now riding, and the wind past the mike of his comm-bead, which told me he was standing with his head out of the hatch. ‘Is there a problem?’

‘Felicia’s gone back for something,’ I said, confident that he knew his sister well enough to infer the rest.

‘I see,’ he said, in a tone which told me I was right. ‘Any further orders?’

‘Form up on the ridge,’ I said, ‘just as we discussed.’ I glanced at Piers, who nodded. If the greenskins bypassed the compound we’d have the advantage of the high ground. Loaded down as we were, we were in no condition for an extended chase, we’d just be picked off one by one, and if we had to stand and fight I wanted all the edge we could get.

‘Confirm that. Tayber out.’ The link went dead. I glanced back at the auspex screen. Felicia had just reached the compound, and the tank was almost there. Outrider two was making good progress back towards us as well, the highly tuned engine of the scout Salamander keeping them out of weapons range of the orks while they moved around the greenskins in a wide arc, trying to get visual confirmation of the enemy disposition. I drew in my breath. The first blips of the approaching enemy formation had appeared at the edge of Orrily’s screen, reflecting from the small round eyeglasses he habitually wore.

‘It’s going to be tight,’ I warned everyone.

‘I’m on it,’ Felicia assured me. ‘I’ve got two pallets of main gun ammunition stacked up at the gate already. Sautine, can you get them loaded?’

‘No,’ the tank commander said flatly. ‘But we can carry them externally. It’ll only take a couple of minutes to get them lashed down.’

‘Good enough,’ Felicia said, cheerful as ever. ‘I’ll carry another on the lifter.’ That, if I remembered rightly, should give them enough to completely replenish their shot locker and still have a handful to spare.

‘You’ve only got a couple of minutes,’ I warned them.

‘Outrider two,’ our scouts cut in, underlining the point perfectly. ‘Confirm eight ork trucks, twelve buggies. They’re moving in force.’

‘How many infantry?’ I asked. If each of those trucks were fully loaded we could be facing more than a hundred greenskins. Even with the advantage of the high ground, we’d have our work cut out.

‘Couple of dozen, mainly the small ones,’ the scout confirmed, a note of puzzlement in his voice. ‘The trucks are mostly empty.’

‘They’re here for loot,’ I said, the pieces suddenly falling into place. While gutting the southern installation, they must have discovered the location of this one, sent scouts to secure it, and followed up with the heavy transport. Crossing Sautine’s trail had been an unfortunate coincidence, nothing more, but I was under no illusions that the prospect of combat hadn’t fired up their innate bloodlust. Our driver swung us to a halt, and I picked up an amplivisor, intending to assess the situation for myself.

‘Looks that way to me,’ Piers agreed, lowering the boarding ramp. I trotted outside, Jurgen at my heels as usual, and raised the vision aids. All around me, soldiers were taking up defensive positions, supplemented by the militia, while the rest of the civilians huddled in the rear, clutching their lasguns grimly. This wasn’t good; if the greenskins charged us, they were likely to open up in panic, heedless of the troopers in the way, inflicting more casualties on us than on the orks.

‘Kolfax.’ I beckoned our guide over. ‘Get the civilians moving. If the greenskins attack we’ll hold them off while you get clear.’

‘Right.’ He nodded, not bothering with even a token protest, to my unutterable relief, and started herding them back aboard their vehicles.

‘Good thinking,’ Piers said, looking at me with an expression of sober respect. ‘At least we can keep the refugees safe.’

‘For the time being,’ I said, wondering briefly if I could contrive an excuse to go with them, but overall my chances of survival were better surrounded by trained troopers. There was a whole continent full of greenskins to get past yet. ‘And once we’ve dealt with this we can catch them up.’ I turned, catching sight of Arriot. ‘You’d better go too,’ I said. To my surprise he shook his head.

‘You might be taking casualties,’ he pointed out, ‘and if you do they’ll have a better chance with Kaeti here.’

‘Who?’ I asked, momentarily confused, and he gestured towards the

ambulance, which for the first time I noticed had *Kaeti* crudely painted across its nose: the name of the girlfriend of one of the corpsmen, I assumed.⁷⁶ The coin dropping, I nodded. 'What about your patients?' Not that I was particularly concerned, of course, but it was the sort of thing I was expected to say.

Ariott nodded soberly. 'They're stable enough,' he said, meaning the ones most likely to die already had. 'They'll be more comfortable in *Kaeti*, but they can manage on one of the trucks for an hour or two, and it would free up the stretchers just in case.'

'Good.' I nodded. 'Get it organised, will you? With any luck we won't need them, but it should help.' In more ways than one, knowing there are medical facilities close at hand is always a big morale booster for troopers about to go into combat.

'Leave it to me.' Arriot wandered off to consult with Kolfax, and I raised the amplivisor: with a sudden flare of *déjà vu*, I realised I was in almost exactly the same position I'd been in when I first looked down on the plain below to see the orks besieging the supply dump.

The power lifter was clearly visible by the main gate, a pallet of shells for the *Leman Russ*'s battle cannon already gripped in its manipulator claws, and the tank itself was almost at the compound. As I watched, it slewed to a halt, and the top hatch popped, followed a moment later by the side ones. The crew started scrambling out under the energetic direction of their commander, easily distinguished by the headset she wore, which seemed from this distance to be a cruder and more bulky version of my comm-bead. They all seemed to be women, which didn't surprise me; mixed-gender units were a rare exception in the Imperial Guard (although I was to serve with one such unit later on, of course⁷⁷), and the PDF tended to follow suit.

Felicia dropped the pallet of shells neatly atop the left-hand sponson, and the tankies started lashing it down, while the power lifter scooped up a replacement and trotted around the hull to repeat the operation on the other side.

I shifted the amplivisor, moving the narrow image to take in the roiling cloud of dust in the distance. It was closing fast, the glint of metal visible behind it, and I was sure I could make out the dim silhouettes of individual vehicles. As I tried to bring the image into clearer focus, I was able to discern some intermittent muzzle flashes as the first few greenskin gunners gave way to their instinctive aggression, wasting ammunition in a futile

gesture of bloodlust long before they could have a hope of finding a target. Nevertheless, it was a sobering sight.

‘That’s it,’ I voxed. ‘You’re out of time. Get moving!’

‘In a moment.’ Sautine sounded infuriatingly calm. ‘Lina, Belle, grab a can each.’ I turned my gaze back to the tank. Two of the crewwomen were breaking shells out of the pallet still lying on the sand. A moment later they began staggering back to their vehicle encumbered by the weights they were carrying.

‘You don’t have time for this!’ I said, my voice rising a little. Felicia scooped up the pallet and began to pilot the Sentinel back towards the ridge, moving in the peculiar jerky run common to such vehicles travelling at speed, which I always find uncannily reminiscent of a startled snowhen.⁷⁸

‘I’m not running without something to keep them off our backs!’ Sautine snapped back.

I swept the amplivisor towards the onrushing orks, then back to the tank. To my relief, the two crewwomen were disappearing inside, and the tracks were beginning to turn. Sautine scrambled aboard as the tank ground past her, flecks of paint springing from the armour plate as a couple of lucky shots found their mark, and the hatch slammed shut. When I heard her voice again, it was faintly breathless. ‘See? Plenty of time.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ I said, my eyes glued to the amplivisor. The tank was picking up speed, but the orks were closing fast, taking renewed heart from the closeness of their prey. I swallowed, my mouth dry, and became suddenly aware of Piers standing at my shoulder, equally tense. ‘Have we got anything we can cover them with from this range?’

‘Nothing,’ the young lieutenant said, his voice grim.

‘We can take care of ourselves now.’ Sautine sounded confident at any rate. The turret of the fleeing tank began to traverse, the cannon, slewing round to point back towards the advancing ork horde. Just when I was beginning to think she’d left it too late, the ork gunners finally beginning to find their mark, a puff of smoke erupted from the barrel, followed a second or two later by the muted thunderclap of the discharge.

The shot was a good one, fully justifying the risk of allowing the enemy to close the distance, detonating against the front armour of a buggy, which appeared to be mounting a rack of crude rockets. The shell penetrated the armour easily, detonating inside the vehicle, which erupted in a fireball. A moment later the warheads of the rockets cooked off too, sending shards of

flaming debris pin-wheeling through the air in all directions to disrupt the enemy advance. By great good fortune, the main body of the blazing wreck slewed sideways, ramming a second buggy and overturning it. Locked together, the two piles of scrap started blazing merrily, a single stunned greenskin staggering to its feet after apparently being thrown clear, by a miracle. It just had time to appreciate its good fortune before being mashed flat by another of the ramshackle vehicles, too fixated on engaging the tank to take any notice of stray pedestrians.

‘That gave them something to think about,’ Piers commented.

I shook my head. ‘They’re still coming. Get everyone ready. The moment they come into range, I want as much covering fire as we can pour down there.’

The sand around the tank and the power lifter was being churned up by the enemy fire, rippling like water on a beach. Felicia was evading with every scrap of agility the sturdy little walker possessed, but it could only be a matter of time before she took a hit in that massive container of promethium, and when that happened it would all be over. The same thought had evidently occurred to her. To my astonishment she pivoted on the spot, continuing to run the thing backwards almost as fast as she’d been able to go forwards. (Something even a veteran Sentinel pilot would have thought twice about, but Felicia’s instinctive rapport with machinery was truly exceptional, even for a tech-priest.) Another of the buggies tried to close, and she hosed it down with the flamer. The wash of fire didn’t do any noticeable damage to the vehicle itself, but the driver was immolated on the spot, blazing away merrily like a purgation night effigy.⁷⁹ Which, being an ork, wasn’t enough to kill him outright of course, before expiring, he tried to ram the Sentinel. Fortunately, Felicia was ready for that, pirouetting the clumsy machine neatly out of his way, and the buggy disappeared over the horizon leaving a trail of greasy smoke in its wake.

‘All units stand by!’ Piers ordered, a ripple of anticipation sweeping along the line of troopers and irregulars, followed almost immediately by an air of deadly intent. Everywhere I looked, in brief snatches, reluctant to tear my gaze away from the drama unfolding in the narrow field of the amplivisor, I saw lasguns being steadied and heavy weapon teams preparing to fire. Luskins had evidently picked a target already, swinging the barrel of his rocket launcher almost infinitesimally as he tracked it, while Jodril was laying out a line of replacement rounds ready to load again the instant his

teammate had fired; an alternating sequence of frag and krak rounds, clearly intended to disable a vehicle and take out the crew as they disembarked. Over to my left, I made out Demara lying prone behind her new toy, finger on the trigger, but to my vague and relieved surprise resisting the temptation to fire early, while Tamworth prepared another belt of ammunition.

‘Outrider two,’ the scout team reported. ‘They’re bypassing the supply dump.’ Hardly a surprise, but disappointing all the same. It looked as though we were going to have to do this the hard way.

Down on the plain, the Leman Russ fired again, taking out one of the trucks, but it was their last shot, and we all knew it. A moment later, Sautine confirmed the fact.

‘We’re dry,’ she said matter-of-factly.

‘Keep going,’ I said as encouragingly as I could, while Felicia barbequed another buggy incautious enough to get within range. ‘You’re almost there.’ I glanced at Piers, who nodded confirmation.

‘Tullock, drop a few rounds behind our friends.’

‘You got it, LT.’ A second or two later I heard the unmistakable popping of multiple mortar rounds leaving the tubes, and trained my amplivisor back on the tank and the power lifter. The rounds seemed to take an eternity to arrive, but when they did they threw up a cloud of pulverised soil between the fleeing vehicles and their ork pursuers, who seemed gratifyingly disconcerted by the surprise. The leading buggies were almost within the beaten zone, at least a couple of them momentarily losing control as the explosions erupted under their noses, but true to their bestial nature they simply forged on, heedless of the possibility of being hit. Felicia spun the power lifter round again and began bounding up the slope, opening up a slight lead on the tank, which began growling its way up the incline behind her.

‘That’s it,’ I said. ‘They’re in range. Fire at will, try not to hit our own people.’ The last I added in a faintly jocular tone, but the warning was necessary anyway. The militia crews were barely familiar with their new weapons, and couldn’t be relied on for anything approaching accuracy.

Fortunately the same couldn’t be said for the PDF troopers. They might not have been up to Imperial Guard standards, but months of fighting had more than made up for the deficiencies in their training and standard of discipline. Luskins picked off one of the trucks with a krak rocket, neat as you please, just before the first wave of ork vehicles disappeared under a

barrage of mortar shells, which left two of them very definitely out of the fight. The whole of our ragtag army opened up then, although the chances of hitting anything with a lasgun at this range by anything other than sheer dumb luck were minimal (which Jurgen proved almost immediately by picking off the driver of one of the buggies, which obligingly grounded itself in one of the craters left by the mortar bombardment). Rockets, autocannon rounds, bolter shells and lascannon bolts rained down on the greenskins, throwing them into even greater confusion, and slaughtering the crews of the vehicles which had become bogged down or disabled.

‘Keep firing!’ I yelled, my laspistol out and spitting futile bolts down the slope at nothing in particular, but looking appropriately martial, I hoped. We were taking some return fire, but it was as sporadic and aimless as I’d come to expect from the greenskins, and only a couple of our people went down. ‘Drive them back!’

‘My pleasure.’ The Leman Russ joined us at the crest of the ridge at last; a few forlorn ork rounds spanging disconsolately from the armour plate, and Sautine popped the top hatch as it rolled to a halt. ‘Get the rest of those rounds up here!’ Felicia obligingly trotted up with the pallet of shells which, against all the odds, she’d kept a firm grip on throughout the chase, and the tankies started handing them off into the bowels of their chariot (which for some reason had been decorated with a crudely-executed cartoon of a red-furred, bushy-tailed creature in flak armour carrying a lasgun, with the word *Vixens* stencilled beneath it.⁸⁰).

‘They’re breaking,’ outrider two reported after a moment.

Jurgen shook his head. ‘No they’re not. They’ll just regroup, and come at us again. It’s what they do.’ Well, he was the nearest thing we had to an expert on these creatures’ behaviour, so I was inclined to listen.

‘What can we do to discourage them?’ I asked.

My aide shrugged. ‘Keep them apart. The smaller a group gets, the more disheartened they are. But if they manage to regroup they’ll start to ignore their own casualties again.’ An afterthought seemed to strike him. ‘And concentrate on the big ones. The little ones will run anyway.’ A quick glance through the amplivisor was enough to confirm this much at least, the slighter figures of the gretchin scuttling away from the carnage as fast as their misshapen lower limbs would carry them. They seemed to be heading for the supply dump, no doubt hoping to find refuge behind the solid earthworks protecting it. An attempt, I reflected grimly, which was going to

backfire on them badly.

An idea began to coalesce around the information Jurgen had just given me.

‘Frag rounds,’ I ordered. ‘Keep the survivors dispersed.’ If anyone wondered what I was playing at they didn’t bother to argue. A moment later, my ears were assaulted by the thunderclap of the Leman Russ firing, and another of the ork trucks exploded into scrap.

‘Don’t have any of those,’ Sautine informed me laconically. ‘So if it’s all right with you we’ll just keep taking the transport out.’

‘Feel free,’ I assured her. The main thrust of my makeshift plan appeared to be working: as the groups of orks dwindled in numbers, their fighting spirit seemed to drain away too, just as Jurgen had predicted, and they began to pull back in ones and twos, sometimes in groups as large as half a dozen. I directed our fire as best I could under the circumstances, keeping them separated by bursts of autocannon fire or a sudden flurry of mortar rounds, until to my immense relief, I realised the greenskin retreat was turning into a rout. One by one, the surviving vehicles wheeled about and made for the illusory safety of the supply dump, the little clumps of orks on foot following as best they could. A cheer went up all along the ridge line as our makeshift army scented their victory, and the firing finally petered out as even the most enthusiastic irregular eventually realised that the last surviving greenskin was now well outside the effective range of their weapon. I tracked them with the amplivisor until the last hobbling figure made it as far as the berm.

‘Tayber,’ I voxed. ‘Whenever you’re ready.’

‘No point in hanging about,’ the sergeant agreed, clearly determined not to seem any less calm about things than I appeared to be. For a moment nothing seemed to happen, and I was just beginning to wonder if our careful preparations had been discovered and neutralised and if I should ask Sautine to try lobbing a couple of shells into the compound and hope for the best, when the ground shuddered beneath my feet.

‘Golden throne!’ Demara said, glee and awe intermingling in her voice, and I’ve no doubt she wasn’t the only one to feel that way. The installation was gone, in a flash of eye-stabbing brilliance, transposed in a heartbeat to a thick pall of dust, debris and smoke which rose into the clear desert air like a fart from the bowels of hell.

‘Well, that takes care of the orks,’ I said, holstering my sidearm with a

suitably theatrical flourish, 'at least for today.'

'Oh well.' Demara shrugged, clearly relishing the prospect of repeating the performance. 'Plenty more where they came from.'

'Quite right, miss,' Jurgen agreed, nodding sagely.

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Editorial Note:

There now follows one of the many frustrating lacunae in Cain's account of his activities. Typically, these occur where he considers that nothing of particular interest has happened in the interim, picking up his account some hours, days, or, as in this instance, weeks after the previous incident he's described. At least here he does elide the intervening period, but since he does so both briefly and in his habitual offhand manner I felt that a more comprehensive overview of events was warranted at this juncture.

Readers wanting to know more about this stage of Cain's journey are referred to the volume of Sergeant Tayber's memoirs previously cited, which goes into every skirmish in exhaustive detail, along with far more than anyone really needs to know about the minutiae of desert survival, particularly in regard to the processes necessary to recycle urine into potable water.

From Green Skins and Black Hearts: The Ork Invasion of Perlia by Hismyonie Kallis, 927 M41

The destruction of the supply dump was enough to confirm the impression the high command was beginning to form, that something of unexpected significance was occurring in the very heart of the ork held territories, although at that time they had no idea of who might be responsible. If they were even aware of Cain's existence then it would only have been as an unfortunate footnote to the Battle of the Halo, a lone survivor who had almost made it to safety before being killed by an opportunistic marauder.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the explosion was large enough to direct the attention of their

orbital sensor nets to the site, from where they were able to track the progress of what was to become the legendary March of the Liberator.

We can only imagine their astonishment at the apparent appearance from nowhere of the first significantly sized fighting force to be sighted on the eastern continent since the greenskins overran the territory. Indeed, initially, they concluded that Cain's convoy consisted of orks, engaged in the usual round of internecine squabbling endemic to the race, and that the Imperial vehicles among the company had been captured by the enemy rather than the other way round.

That impression hardly lasted the first week, however. Analysis of the ensuing engagements showed a tactical sophistication unheard of among the greenskins, with clear evidence of Imperial units acting in accordance with standard battlefield doctrines. From that point on, as the patchwork fighting force swept from victory to victory, its numbers swelling with every civilian liberated and every unit of stragglers absorbed, it could no longer be denied that control of the occupied region was slipping inexorably from the conqueror's grasp.



TWENTY

Jurgen's pessimism notwithstanding, we made pretty good progress over the next few weeks. As we continued to hop from supply dump to supply dump our numbers grew, each stop adding another trickle of isolated units responding to our vox hails, and our scouts ran across the occasional straggler themselves. It wasn't until after we'd left the desert behind that things really started to improve. Gradually the heat and the sand gave way to cool green vegetation, and the ruins of untended fields replaced the monotony of the unending dunes.

That led to other problems, of course. Now we were entering what had been more civilised climes, we were being funnelled into what remained of the road network, the cultivated ground being far harder for our motley collection of vehicles to plough across than the open desert. Not to mention the walls, fences, and other obstructions, which would have bogged us down if we'd tried to negotiate them. Luckily, Kolfax was still equal to the challenge, having found an official mapslate of the road network at the regional office of his former employers in a bombed-out township we swept through the morning after leaving the desert for good. (Adding another bunch of civilians to our baggage train in the process, but on the whole I suppose the trade-off was worth it.⁸²) With that in hand, we were able to split our forces, spreading them out along several parallel routes, co-ordinating the whole thing over the vox. That kept us moving through the main agricultural zone at a reasonable speed, avoiding too many bottlenecks, and on a wide enough front to reinforce any groups who ran into more greenskins than they could conveniently handle by themselves, without too much difficulty.

'So far so good,' I said one evening, settled comfortably in the kitchen of

an isolated farmhouse in the foothills of the mountain range, which just for once had turned out to have its roof still on. We'd reached sufficient altitude for the air to be growing perceptibly chiller, much to Jurgen's evident delight, although everyone else seemed to share my reservations about the fact, keeping as close to the fire he'd kindled in the grate as possible. Kolfax nodded, studying the mapslate.

'You've got us this far,' he acknowledged, in the tone of a man admitting that this was something he'd never expected to see, 'but now it gets really difficult.' The rest of our little group leaned in across the polished wooden tabletop, scarred from generations of use, and heaped with discarded plates, which Jurgen was just beginning to clear.

Piers and Tayber were there, of course, the *de facto* leaders of the military contingent. We'd acquired a few more officers and NCOs of equal rank to both in the course of our travels, but they'd been with me longer than anyone else, and I trusted them accordingly (or, to be a little more accurate, distrusted them less than anyone else in the unit apart from Jurgen). We were up to about company strength,⁸³ although our patchwork organisational structure was like nothing the authors of the *Tactica Imperialis* would recognise, and I'd granted them battlefield promotions to keep the lines of command relatively clear. Piers was now a captain, at least in theory,⁸⁴ and Tayber his CSM.⁸⁵ I'd also invited Norbert, who had stayed on top of the increasingly complex logistical problems presented by the steady growth of our merry little band with an ease which astonished me, and Felicia, both as our technical expert and because she was by far the most congenial company in the bunch, to join us.

'You mean the mountains,' I said, and Kolfax nodded.

'Precisely.' He gestured at the display, zooming in towards the sector we currently occupied. 'At the moment, we're spread out along a two-kilometre wide front, running along these roads, here.' We were roughly in the centre, of course, with the armour spearheading our advance,⁸⁶ he mechanised infantry on our flanks, and the scouts ranging ahead to spot any unpleasant surprises. The irregulars and the civilians were with us too, as protected as we could contrive, and, if I'm honest, adding an extra layer of expendable cannon fodder between me and any greenskin formation large enough to threaten us directly. 'The problem is, we're almost into them already, and the higher we go the fewer options we have.' He indicated the network of highways, which were already beginning to narrow towards a

single choke point. 'We'll be at the pass in less than a week, and once that happens there's only one way to go.'

'And the greenies will know that,' Tayber put in helpfully, as if I needed his assistance to spot the blindingly obvious. We'd made enough of a nuisance of ourselves on our journey so far for me to be pretty sure that they'd want to shut us down once and for all, and, dim as they were, it should have been pretty evident, even to them, where we were making for. My palms tingled, anticipating the ambush I was certain would be lying in wait for us as we tried to thread that narrow gorge.

'That would explain the reports we've been getting from the outriders,' Piers added. I nodded soberly. Our scouts had spotted several large formations of greenskins following our trail in the last few days, but hanging back with a patience completely at odds with everything I thought I'd begun to understand about the creatures. No doubt they were waiting for us to begin traversing the pass and engage the ambushing force, before falling on us from behind.

'You're absolutely sure there's no other way through the mountains?' I asked Kolfax, already knowing what his answer was going to be. 'No back trails like there were in the desert?'

He shook his head. 'Nothing the vehicles can manage.' He tapped the screen, just above the pass. 'This is it. Unless we divert around the whole range. If we head north for about eight hundred kilometres we can skirt the edge of it, keeping to the foothills.' His tone was all the indication I needed of what he thought about that idea, and I nodded in agreement. We'd be under attack by the greenskins the whole way, and even if by some miracle we were able to get around the mountains with the bulk of our forces intact, we'd still have the same distance to travel southwards before we reached the peninsular. This time we'd be penned in to a narrow coastal strip, where the orks could mass their forces against us with even greater ease.

'It looks like we're frakked,' I said. I turned to Piers, trying to hide the apprehension churning in my gut. 'We'll have to chance running the pass. If we can punch through whatever they've got waiting for us before the trailing force can get close enough to engage, we might just get away with it.'

'That's a pretty big if,' the young captain said.

I nodded soberly. 'Even so,' I said, 'I think it's the best chance we've got.' The hell of it was, I was right, and everyone knew it; hardly any chance is

still better than none at all, a call I would be forced to make innumerable times over the years, and usually in straits far more dire than these. (Like my desperate leap through the necron warp portal on Interitus Prime, or the time I found myself charging a daemon of Khorne with just a rusty bayonet and a vial of holy water, both occasions which still feature strongly in my dreams even after all these years.) I smiled grimly, trying to put heart into the others with a wholly counterfeit display of resolution. ‘We can’t go over it, we can’t go under it, so...’

‘Perhaps we can,’ Felicia said thoughtfully, looking at the mapslate in a manner I can only describe as speculative. She pointed to a lake, filling a mountain valley not far from the main road though the pass. There was some kind of building on the shoreline, tagged with the sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus. I looked at her, trying not to get carried away with the sudden surge of hope I’d felt at her words. Despite her impulsiveness and casual optimism, I’d learned in the past few weeks that her judgement could usually be trusted.

‘How do you mean?’ I asked. By way of reply she zoomed in on the image to its maximum resolution. I studied the topography thus revealed in a state of vague incomprehension. ‘It looks like a dead end to me.’

The lake was at the head of a long, narrow valley, which had been dammed at the top end to form a vast artificial reservoir. A thin trail wound up it, following the line of a riverbed in which a trickle of water still flowed, no doubt fed by the sluices, but the banks were a great deal further apart; clearly it had carried far more water in the past. As the road approached the dam, it diverged from the depleted watercourse, rising up the valley side in a series of steep switchbacks, to run across the top of the vast structure, before terminating in front of the building I’d first noticed on the map. This too appeared to be huge, almost large enough to house a Titan,⁸⁷ and I couldn’t imagine what its purpose might be.

Norbert frowned, something obviously striking his innate sense of order as out of place, and indicated the partially dried-up riverbed.

‘Where’s the rest of the water going?’ he asked.

Now he came to point it out, it was obvious that the upper reaches of the river above the lake were feeding far more into it than was appearing through the sluices at the bottom of the dam.

Felicia smiled. ‘Under the mountains,’ she replied. She reduced the scale of the map again, and indicated another Mechanicus shrine on the lower

slopes of the range, this time on the far side from us. I drew in my breath. It was almost on the coastal plain, barely a hundred kilometres from the peninsular. If we could somehow reach it without going through the pass we'd outflank the orks, and take the main force no doubt still massing next to the land bridge completely by surprise. For the first time there seemed to be a real chance of getting across it to safety. 'There's a generating station there, powered by the water from this reservoir, and an aqueduct connecting the two.'

'That's all very well,' I said, my head reeling. 'But it would take us days to get everyone that far on foot. And if the greenskins find the tunnel before we get through...'

Felicia laughed, no doubt deducing the image I had in my mind of something akin to the concrete channel Jorgen and I had waded through in Prosperity Wells. 'We'll take the vehicles, silly,' she said. 'The aqueduct's meant to feed a whole temple of turbines, not a couple of kitchen taps. It's ten metres across at least.'

'But isn't it full of water?' Jorgen asked, homing in on the obvious flaw in the plan.

Felicia nodded. 'Of course it is. That's the whole point. But we can drain it.' She pointed to the dam again. 'Once we open the sluices, the water level in the reservoir will drop rapidly. Within a couple of hours the intake vents will be exposed. Getting them off won't be too much of a problem.' She shrugged. 'They're designed that way, so the repair crews can get in for routine maintenance.'

'Sounds good,' I conceded, beginning to feel cautiously optimistic for the first time since this impromptu conference had begun. 'How do we get the vehicles down there?'

'The same way the repair crews do,' Felicia said, with a trace of asperity. 'You don't think they walk all that way, do you?' Well, it was a fair point, so I nodded in agreement.

'I think we've got a plan,' I said.

It still looked good the next morning, despite my paranoid streak worrying away at it all night, trying to find the catch. There was only one that I could see, and I confided it to Felicia over breakfast.

'The valley's a dead end,' I pointed out. 'If the orks find us before we're ready to go, we'll be boxed in.'

‘That’s true.’ She chewed her toast thoughtfully, and plucked another slice from my plate with her mechadendrite. After a couple of months of decent food she’d filled out nicely, and in all the right places, but still hadn’t shaken the habit of eating everything she could at every opportunity. ‘But we’d only have to hold them off for a short while. And the terrain would be with us.’ Like everyone else in the convoy, she’d acquired a thorough grounding in the practicalities of infantry combat. I nodded in agreement.

‘That’s not what worries me,’ I said. ‘Suppose they come after us, or just flood the tunnel once we’re down there?’

Felicia nodded, and accepted another mug of recaf from the attentively hovering Jurgen, who was barely able to suppress a shudder at the thought of all that water.

‘Blow the tunnel behind us,’ she said. ‘By the time they dig through the rubble we’ll be long gone. And if we wreck the sluices before we leave, they won’t be able to raise the water level enough to flush us out.’

‘That sounds good,’ I said. We had enough explosives with us to do the job, neat as you please, so I couldn’t see a problem with that. Now my last reservation was gone I was almost looking forward to the venture. ‘It’s a shame we can’t stick around to enjoy the expressions on their faces when they realise we’ve given them the slip.’

We resumed our journey in something approaching high spirits. True, we’d have to consolidate our scattered forces again, but I could comfortably leave that to Piers and Tayber to sort out. Confident that the closest enemy patrol was some kilometres away, I stuck my head out of the top hatch of the Chimera, enjoying the crisp morning air while I could. Felicia’s plan might just get us around the main choke point, but while we were passing through the mountains we’d still be vulnerable to ambushes, and I’d be spending most of the trip behind the comforting solidity of armour plate.

In the event, things went practically without a hitch, unless you count a couple of our foraging parties running into firefights with isolated groups of greenskins, which both ended with gratifying suddenness as soon as Sautine arrived on the scene, and before the week was out I found myself trundling up the narrow valley leading to the dam.

The mountain scenery was even bleaker than I’d envisaged from the topographical display we’d studied, but not without grandeur. High peaks loomed over us, capped by snowfields which Jurgen stared at longingly, but he was to be disappointed on this trip; our destination lay below the

snowline, and the opposite end of the aqueduct was a couple of thousand metres below us, almost at sea level. Beside the road, the trickle of water from the sluices in the dam ahead rippled and chuckled in its oversized channel, and thick scrub stained the valley sides with mottled shades of brown, green, and the occasional vivid patch of yellow or purple.

The dam itself loomed over everything, a vast wall of dull, grey rockcrete, which cut across the valley ahead of us like the outer defences of a fortified city, and I tried not to think about the sheer volume of water it held back. Intellectually, I knew that it had held solid for decades, but I couldn't help picturing the scene in my mind of what it would be like if it were to suddenly give way. Shuddering at the image, I turned in the turret of our carrier, and waved to Felicia, who was pacing us easily in her modified Sentinel.

'How do you know so much about this place, anyway?' I asked. When she replied, her voice was as warm as ever, despite the attenuation of the vox-link.

'It's one of the great marvels of the planet,' she said. 'Every tech-priest knows about it. We study the systems in the seminary.'

'How very fortunate for us,' I said dryly.

Felicia laughed. 'It's fascinating stuff, even if you ignore all the local superstition about the place.'

'How do you mean?' I asked. 'Surely the shrine is properly sanctified in the name of the Emperor?' I'm not the most pious of men, as I'd be the first to admit, but even in those days I'd seen enough of the malevolence of the galaxy to think twice about tempting fate, and trespassing on unhallowed ground definitely qualified as that in my book. (Of course that was nothing to some of the sights I was to see in later years, the inside of an eldar reiver citadel, a necron tomb world, or a city tainted by the touch of Chaos being far more blasphemous abominations than anything my callow younger self could possibly have envisaged, but I digress.)

'The Ommissiah,' Felicia corrected, her voice amused, 'but yes, of course it is. The stories go back long before the dam was here, though.'

'They do?' Despite its obvious artificiality I found that hard to believe. Somehow, that gigantic wall looked as though it had always been there.

Felicia nodded. 'Thousands of years. How do you think it got its name in the first place?'

'What name is that?' I asked, trying to fight down a growing sense of

foreboding.

Felicia's voice took on a familiar sense of mischief. 'The Valley of Daemons,' she said cheerfully.

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TWENTY-ONE

Despite the myriad claims on my attention, I couldn't quite shake the sense of foreboding Felicia's casual words had stirred up in me, but there was no time to quiz her further on the matter, as our convoy finally reached the vast citadel looming over the dam and began to spread out around the piazza which fronted it. Fully as large as a parade ground, it was surfaced in tiles the size of my thumbnail, which made up a vast mosaic of images sacred to the cult of the Machine-God. I'd have expected work so delicate to be ground to powder under the tracks of our war machines, but to my surprise they weren't even scratched.

'Set up the heavy stuff to cover the road,' I ordered Sautine, who I'd put in charge of our armour detachment. She nodded.

'Already on it.' She gestured towards the *Vixen*, its turret and lascannon pointing across the valley towards the narrow ribbon of rockcrete clinging to the slope on the other side, flanked by the other Leman Russes. 'And I've got the Basilisk set up to drop some heavy ordnance on the valley mouth if the greenskins try to get through before we're ready to pull out.'

'Good thinking,' I complimented her. The mobile artillery piece would be better employed in that role, where its greater range could be used to its fullest effect. A couple of Earthshaker shells ought to disrupt any ork advance through that narrow choke point very nicely, I thought.

'Shame we can't blow the dam,' Sautine commented, with a regretful look at the causeway running along the top of the two hundred metre-high wall to where we now stood. 'That'd stop them from following right enough.'

'It would,' I agreed, but there was no chance of that; we didn't have enough explosives in the entire convoy to put a dent in that vast expanse of rockcrete. 'You could try mining the causeway.'

‘I’ll get someone on it,’ Sautine agreed, turning away.

Well, that was our defence taken care of. Time to find out whether Felicia was right, and salvation lay a few metres below the surface of the huge and placid expanse of water stretching away into the distance, or whether I’d just led us into a dead-end deathtrap.

I turned and made my way through the throng of soldiers and irregulars, exchanging a word or a joke with a few random faces, dispensing morale boosting platitudes to a handful more, and kept an eye out for a familiar white robe.

The tech-priest was waiting for me at the entrance to the shrine, which loomed over us, votive statuary encrusting its surface, which still seemed somehow to retain a purity of line and form in the best aesthetic traditions of the Mechanicus. Jorgen was with her, a lasgun in his hands, and I have to admit that I was glad to see him. Felicia had made it very clear that the control shrine was consecrated ground, on which only ordained tech-priests were supposed to tread, and that accompanying her was a rare privilege for anyone outside the Adeptus Mechanicus. (To tell the truth I’d have been perfectly happy to leave her to deal with whatever needed doing inside, but she’d pointed out that command decisions might need to be taken, and I could do that most effectively if I was on the spot at the time.)

Her artisans hovered nearby, expressions of envy on their faces, no doubt hoping that their presence would also turn out to be required inside the towering temple of technological marvels.

‘Ready?’ she asked, glancing in my direction, and I nodded, wondering if that was entirely true. ‘Good. We might as well get on with it, then.’ It was only at this point I realised that she was a great deal more nervous than she would have liked me to know, and somehow that increased my own confidence again. Leaving Jorgen to fall in at my shoulder as usual, his distinctive aroma assuring me that he’d done so without me having to turn my head to check, I led the way towards the massive bronze portal sealing the entrance to the shrine. After a moment, Felicia joined me, keeping roughly a pace ahead of us, as befitted an excursion onto consecrated ground.

‘That’s odd.’ Her voice held a note of puzzlement rather than alarm, but I found myself loosening my weapons in their holster and scabbard, nevertheless. If push came to shove, I’d use them first and argue about the theological implications later.

‘What is?’ I asked, noting out of the corner of my eye that Jurgen had followed my lead, flicking off the safety catch of his lasgun. The doors loomed over us, thick slabs of bronze embossed with the cogwheel sigil of the Adeptus, fully four times the height of a man. One of them stood slightly ajar, just wide enough to admit our little party, and Felicia indicated it, frowning in puzzlement.

‘That ought to be sealed. Only a consecrated tech-priest should be able to open it.’

‘Maybe the staff left it like that when they evacuated,’ Jurgen suggested. Felicia shook her head.

‘That’s just it. They should still be here, carrying out the rituals of operation. This is a sacred site, they wouldn’t just abandon it.’

‘Then why didn’t they come out to meet us?’ I asked. I gestured behind us, to the scores of troopers and refugees and our ragtag collection of vehicles. ‘They must have noticed us coming.’

‘Maybe the greenskins got here first,’ Jurgen suggested, looking around warily for something to shoot at. I shook my head.

‘Look at the place. It’s still intact. The orks would have wrecked it.’ There was no sign at all of the wanton destruction an ork assault would have wreaked, not so much as a single pockmark in the immaculate white stonework from a stray stubber round. The only creatures that seemed to have left their mark on the building were the local birds. Curiously, however, I found the lack of evidence of foul play even more sinister than its presence might have been. I fought down a rising sense of unease. ‘They must just be hiding,’ I added, decisively. ‘Once they realise we’re friends they’ll come on out.’

‘Unless the daemons have got them,’ Jurgen suggested gloomily.

‘That’s just local superstition,’ Felicia snapped, a little too hastily, and my aide subsided.

‘Nevertheless,’ I said, drawing my laspistol, ‘perhaps we should go first.’ I was expecting her to object, of course, or I’d never have suggested it, but to my well-concealed surprise she nodded.

‘That might be more prudent,’ she agreed.

Well, there was no help for it after that, I couldn’t risk losing face, so I levelled the weapon and slipped through the gap, my nerves wound up tighter than harp strings. Jurgen followed, his lasgun seeking a target, and a moment later Felicia joined us.

‘It’s not too late to bring a squad along as escort,’ I suggested, taking stock of our surroundings as I did so. Nobody seemed to be shooting at us, but there were plenty of places that might have concealed a sniper, so I kept my gun in my hand in any case.

We were in a wide, high room, artfully lit by concealed luminators, which filled the space with a diffuse glow, no doubt intended to seem both functional and meditative. Arcane mechanisms I couldn’t identify were mounted on plinths, for display or veneration, and Felicia stared at them with wide, wondering eyes, although to me they just looked like so much scrap metal.

‘No,’ she said, her voice hushed. ‘We can’t profane this place any more than we need to.’

‘Fine,’ I agreed. ‘You’re the expert.’ Nevertheless, I voxed Tayber. ‘Get a couple of kill teams together,’ I ordered. ‘Ready to come in the moment we call, but not a second before.’ I glanced across at the unnaturally subdued tech-priest. ‘Is that all right with you?’ To my relief she nodded.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘If we need to call them in, this place will already have been desecrated far more than it would be by their presence.’ Which was pragmatic, I suppose, though hardly comforting.

‘All right,’ I said, trying to get orientated, ‘where to?’

‘The control chapel should be that way.’ She pointed towards a staircase at the far end of the entrance hall. The treads were moving, tending upwards, and we moved towards it as quickly as we could, Jurgen and I remaining alert for any sign of movement among the display cases.

‘Commissar.’ My aide came to a sudden halt, although an intervening lump of ironmongery prevented me from seeing what had attracted his attention, for a moment. As I rounded the thing and saw what lay on the polished marble floor at his feet, I turned, hoping to block Felicia’s view, but it was too late. She was standing right behind me, staring at the dead tech-priest with an expression of slack-jawed horror.

‘Do you know him?’ I asked, and she shook her head slowly, trying to take in the enormity of it: a member of her own order, slain in the middle of a shrine.

‘I’ve never been here before,’ she reminded me. ‘Just studied the plans.’

‘He’s been dead for a couple of weeks,’ Jurgen added helpfully. Not killed during the invasion, then. ‘Looks like the greenies have been here after all.’

‘I don’t think Felicia’s daemons would have used a bolter,’ I agreed. The

explosive projectile had detonated inside the man's ribcage, killing him instantly, despite the signs of heavy augmentation packing his chest cavity. 'But the orks would have taken the place apart.'

'They would,' Jurgen agreed. 'And they wouldn't have been so accurate.'

It was only after he spoke that I realised he was right. The tech-priest had been killed with a single shot. Greenskins would have blazed away on full auto, leaving the floor and machine parts surrounding him pitted with impact craters.

'You think humans did this?' Felicia stared from one of us to the other in blank incomprehension. 'But why?'

'I haven't a clue,' I admitted, 'and right now it doesn't matter. We've a job to do here, and a lot of lives depend on us getting it done.'

To her credit, Felicia rallied quickly, no doubt inured to atrocity by her time among the orks and the battles we'd fought since her liberation. She nodded, only the paleness of her face betraying the effort of maintaining her composure.

'Then we'd better get on with it,' she said. 'Whoever's responsible will be long gone by now.'

That was true enough, although I wasn't to become privy to the answer to that particular riddle for more than a decade, and when I did find out what had happened there I can't honestly say that it eased my mind at all.

'Upwards, you said?' I began to lead the way towards the moving staircase, my senses heightened by the sense of imminent danger that the discovery of the corpse had triggered, and it was as well that they were. As I approached it, I noticed a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye, and threw myself reflexively behind another of the lumps of metal littering the hall. As I did so, the unmistakable chatter of a heavy autocannon echoed through the space, the machine (whatever it was), behind which I was sheltering clanging like a temple bell from the impact.

'Tayber!' I yelled. 'We need backup, *now*! Heavy weapons! Move!'

'On our way,' the veteran sergeant assured me, and I stuck my head up as much as I dared, trying to get a glimpse of whoever was trying to kill us. Felicia had taken cover too, her white robe visible behind a plinth a couple of rows away, and the sudden *crack* of a las-bolt ionising the air was enough to let me locate Jurgen (a moment or two before my nose could do the job). The bolt reached its target and expended itself harmlessly against an amalgam of augmetics and flesh, tall and wide as an ogryn and probably

twice as smart.

‘It’s a combat servitor,’ I voxed Tayber. No point in letting our backup come charging in blind. ‘One autocannon, one chainfist.’ I shot at it too, more in hope than expectation, and the thing’s head swung slowly in my direction. That was stupid, I thought, I should have let Jurgen draw its fire. Oh well, too late now. ‘It’s taken some heavy damage,’ I added, getting a closer look at the thing. It looked as though someone had hosed it down thoroughly with a heavy bolter, but not nearly thoroughly enough from where I was standing, its carapace pitted and scarred by the explosive detonations. Its close combat weapon seemed to be out of commission entirely, which was something at least, but it could still inflict enough impact damage with its arm alone to pulp an unarmoured human.

‘Terminate intruders,’ the thing grated through some kind of implanted voxcoder, obsessively repeating the last instruction it had been given in the irritating manner of such devices. ‘Protect the sanctum.’ It unloaded another burst of autocannon fire in my general direction, and took a heavy step towards me.

For a moment, I thought it was going to charge, but Jurgen shot it again and it halted, with something as close as a mindless automaton could come to an expression of confusion. Then its head turned in his direction and repeated the same phrase: ‘Terminate intruders. Protect the sanctum.’

‘Keep it busy!’ I called to my aide as it fired again, in his direction this time, and turned to take a hesitant step towards him. There was a slim chance, I thought, but once again it was better than none; by the time our kill team arrived, we could all be dead, so there was no point waiting for them to save our necks. Powering up my chainsword, I ran at it as fast as I could, before I had the chance to think about what I was doing and change my mind.

I almost made it, before the thing sensed my approach and turned to face the more immediate threat. My humming blade glanced off the power cables sheathing its back, which a few seconds’ rational thought would have told me were bound to be armoured anyway, raising a shower of sparks. It swung its chain fist, which thank the Emperor was still malfunctioning, and I ducked under the punch at the last possible moment, feeling the sudden chill as the wickedly serrated cutting teeth flicked the cap from my head.

I struck upwards with my chainsword, finding a fleshly component more

by luck than judgement, and was rewarded with a torrent of foul-smelling ichor, which cascaded down the neck of my shirt. The thing swung back at me, but now its movements were stiff. I seemed to have disabled that arm, at least.

‘Back off, commissar! We can’t get a clear shot!’ The feminine voice sounded vaguely familiar, but there was no time to worry about that now, I was fighting for my life against a machine designed to take it, and attempting to disengage would only give it the perfect chance. It staggered as Jurgen placed another shot squarely into its back, and I took advantage of its momentary distraction to spin round behind it and slash at those power cables again. A move, which had the same lack of success as before, I might add.

‘Terminate intruders. Protect the sanctum.’ The thing turned towards me again, and I dived for cover as it started to bring the autocannon to bear, knowing even as I did so that I’d never make it, and that there was no way in the galaxy it could possibly miss at this range... I heard a faint, derisory *click*, and rolled behind another pile of scrap, blessing every saint I could think of. The thing was dry. Whatever battle it had been in before must have depleted its ammunition almost completely. A moment later, I thought I must have been mistaken, as the distinctive thudding of an autocannon opened up again, but this time there was no whine of ricochetting bullets in my immediate vicinity, so I stuck my head out to see what was going on.

The servitor was staggering now, taking a hail of autocannon rounds at point-blank range, Demara and Tamworth hosing it down with the assurance of the veterans they’d become. The rest of Grenbow’s team was with them, backing up their efforts with lasgun fire, and the former vox-operator broke off shooting for a moment to wave a greeting to me. Damaged as the thing was, it couldn’t stand up to that sort of sustained abuse for long. Abruptly its knee gave way and it fell heavily to the floor, where it shuddered like a freshly-killed corpse.

‘Cease fire.’ Felicia stood cautiously, edging out from behind her lump of metal, and after a nod from me the militia team complied. The servitor continued to twitch, attempting to rise, and the young engineer took a few cautious steps towards it. Its head turned, apparently taking in her presence, and she held up her cogwheel talisman where the thing could see it (or register its presence in whatever manner it normally used).

‘Terminate intruders,’ it grated again, sounding vaguely confused this

time. 'Protect the—'

'Cancel instructions,' Felicia said, slowly and clearly, her mechadendrite flexing behind her like the tail of a nervous cat. 'Power down.' She hesitated, seemingly on the verge of bolting if the thing failed to recognise her as being authorised to be there, but it made no move to attack her.

The moment stretched.

'Powering down,' the thing echoed suddenly. 'Entering standby mode. Some maintenance may be required.' It stopped moving.

'What the hell's something like that doing in a hydro station?' Demara asked.

'A good question,' I said, retrieving my hat, and placing it on my head with as much insouciance as I could muster given that my shirt was now soaking wet and smelling worse than Jurgen. I turned to Felicia. 'Any idea?'

'None whatsoever,' she replied, looking as baffled as I felt.

'Well we haven't got time to debate it,' I said. 'We need to get the sluices open.' I turned to Grenbow. 'You and your people escort her,' I added, 'in case there are any more of these things running around in here.' I had no intention of remaining inside myself, of course. I returned my attention to the vox. 'Piers, I want three more squads in here now. Search this place from top to bottom. If there are any more unwelcome surprises, I want to know about them.' I half expected Felicia to object, but she just nodded, tight-lipped.

'I'll get on it right away,' she said, turning towards the staircase.

'Already sweeping,' Tayber's familiar voice reassured me. 'We're on the lower level now.'

'What lower level?' Felicia's head snapped round. 'According to the plans, this is the ground floor.'

'Well we've found one,' her brother assured her. 'Behind that moving staircase.'

We hurried in the direction he'd indicated, which Felicia needed to do anyway to get to the sluice controls, and sure enough there was a big hole in the wall behind it.

'What could have done that?' Felicia asked. The edges were ragged, the rockcrete seared and scarred by immense heat.

I shrugged. 'A plasma gun, maybe a melta,' I said. At that point, I hadn't seen either used on the battlefield, but I was familiar enough with their

effects from the occasional demonstration at the schola to take a reasonable guess at it. ‘Whoever did this wanted access, and wasn’t taking no for an answer.’

‘Access to what, though?’ Jurgen asked. There was a stairwell behind the wall, presumably accessed through a hidden doorway of some kind, which had effectively concealed its existence until someone or something had decided to remove the obstacle.

‘There’s a whole lot of rooms down here,’ Tayber reported. ‘Full of technical stuff.’ He hesitated. ‘And dead people. Well armed, most of them.’

‘We’d better take a look,’ I decided. I couldn’t very well avoid whatever trouble this presaged unless I had the best possible idea of what was going on, and it was the sort of thing the people around me expected me to say anyway.

I glanced at Felicia. ‘I hate to ask, but you might just spot something the rest of us would miss.’

‘I agree.’ She nodded. ‘The sluices will just have to wait a few more minutes. Let’s hope the greenskins do the same.’

‘They seem to have ignored this place so far,’ I said. The comely tech-priest nodded.

‘That was before you led an army here,’ she pointed out.

The mysterious lower level was pretty much as Tayber had described it. He met the three of us at the bottom of the staircase (Grenbow and the others having been left to guard our rear), with an expression of extreme disquiet. The other members of Bravo squad were with him, glancing around with a mixture of awe and apprehension.

‘This is the central point,’ he said, indicating corridors branching off in three directions (the fourth would simply have led straight into the reservoir, of course). There were bodies lying at the entrances to all three, ripped apart by bolter fire, but with enough remaining for me to be sure of their identities. Their crimson uniforms, their high proportion of augmetics, and the hellguns they were armed with were all the confirmation I needed.

‘Skitarii,’ I said. Tayber looked blank. ‘Adeptus Mechanicus footsoldiers. They garrison forgeworlds, support the Titan legions, that sort of thing. The question is – what were they doing here?’ I glanced at Felicia, who looked as baffled as her brother.

‘Guarding something, I suppose.’ She looked around. ‘Are there any tech-priests down here?’

‘Yes.’ Tayber nodded. ‘All dead, mostly in that wing.’ He gestured down the left-hand corridor. The chambers along it were large, well lit, and full of arcane devices, which, apart from the ones full of bolter holes, appeared to be fully functional. Most of them also held the corpses of tech-priests, in a similar state of disassembly as their erstwhile bodyguards.

‘Any idea what they were doing?’ I asked Felicia, as we stepped cautiously into a large room full of the usual collection of technological mysteries, and a couple of dead acolytes of the Omnissiah.

She looked around at the equipment surrounding us, the only parts of which I recognised being hololithic displays and a couple of pict screens.

‘They seem to have been studying something,’ she said. ‘Most of these are analytical engines of one sort or another. I can’t tell what they were researching though.’

She padded across to a control lectern, and activated a nearby hololith. The display flickered into life, projecting icons which meant nothing to me, but which left her frowning in consternation. ‘Their databanks have been wiped. All the records are missing.’

‘Very helpful,’ I said dryly.

The engineeer stared at me, her expression grave. ‘Perhaps that’s just as well. If it was worth killing them to suppress whatever they’d discovered, I don’t think I want to know what it was.’

‘Neither do I,’ I agreed, turning to leave the chamber. ‘Let’s do what we came here to do.’

‘Commissar.’ Luskins was waiting outside, Jodril with him as usual, his bulky rocket launcher slung across his shoulder where it continued to get in the way for as long as we were stuck in the narrow corridors. ‘We’ve found something. Looks like a vault.’

That was precisely what it was, the thick impermium doorway leaving little doubt of that. It had clearly been forced. The mark of the energy weapon which had been used to breach this place was unmistakable, what had evidently once been an elaborate locking mechanism melted to slag by its ravaging heat. There was no clue as to what it might have contained, however, just bare metal shelves reflecting the overhead lights.

‘We’ve wasted enough time here,’ I decided, after another cursory sweep had turned up nothing more than a handful of additional corpses. ‘Let’s go

get the sluices open and move out as quickly as we can.'

'You won't get any argument from me,' Felicia agreed, and we hurried up the stairs from that charnel pit as quickly as we could.

Once we'd regained the gently lit hall we'd entered by, I felt an undefinable sense of oppression lift from my soul, and we made straight for the moving staircase, our minds now completely focussed on our primary mission. The other search teams had failed to find any more combat servitors lurking about the place, so I thought I might as well stick with the tech-priest for the time being, in case my presence was required in the control chapel after all.

My improved sense of well-being wasn't to last much longer, however. Almost as my boots hit the rising treads my comm-bead hissed into life again.

'Commissar,' Piers reported. 'The orks are here.'

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TWENTY-TWO

For a few more moments, I was able to cling to the hope that it was only a scouting party which had found us, but that comforting illusion wasn't to last for long. The control chapel Felicia led us to had a wide, clear window looking out over the valley below, no doubt for proper reverential contemplation of the dam and reservoir, tech-priests in general being too far removed from the realms of the flesh to do anything as human as simply admiring the view (which under less stressful circumstances I would undoubtedly have found quite spectacular). Ignoring the wide banks of brass dials and countless switches inlaid in slabs of age-darkened timber, I hurried to the sheet of armourcrys and looked out and down, my breath stilling in my throat.

'There's thousands of them,' Jurgen said at my elbow, and for once I had to concede that he wasn't exaggerating. The entire valley mouth was choked with lurching vehicles, packed with howling greenskins, beginning to swarm towards us like a tyranid horde. Their sheer numbers were impeding their progress, as they funnelled into that narrow defile, but they were sorting themselves out in their usual brutally efficient fashion, the most aggressive and heavily-armed among them already pulling ahead of the pack. Those on the road were making the best time, but to my horror I noticed that the vast majority were simply not bothering to jostle for position on the highway, fanning out instead across the entire valley floor, trusting to the rugged construction of their vehicles and their hardy constitutions to forge across the relatively open ground at a rate I would scarcely have believed possible.

I was about to order the Basilisk to fire, when the unmistakable thud of an Earthshaker going off told me that Sautine had beaten me to it. Our artillery

piece flung three shells in quick succession, all detonating in the heart of the onrushing throng, but we might just as well have been throwing stones into a pond for all the good it did, the tide of howling green death closing as fast as ever.

‘How long have we got?’ I voxed Piers, wishing I’d headed straight for the command Chimera and its array of instrumentation, instead of coming up here to keep an eye on the tech-priest. Watching this on an auspex screen would have been far less bowel-loosening than being faced with the sight of the greenskins themselves.

‘The first wave should close with us in about twenty minutes,’ the young captain informed me, in surprisingly calm tones. ‘They can’t get the vehicles up here without coming across the dam, but we’ll be vulnerable to their foot troops climbing the slope.’

‘Well, that’s something,’ I said. ‘If Sautine can keep the causeway clear, we can pick them off as they disembark.’ Even that was a forlorn hope, though, the sheer number of the greenskins was bound to tell in the end. It looked from here as if all the groups trailing us had consolidated into a single formation, outnumbering us by at least eight to one.⁸⁸ If they’d had even half that number waiting for us in the pass we’d never have survived an attempt to run it, although I had to admit the alternative wasn’t looking all that attractive at the moment either. I turned to Felicia. ‘How long until the tunnel’s clear of water?’

‘I don’t know.’ Her voice was abstracted as she looked over the control lectern in front of her, ignoring the terrifying sight beyond the window with what seemed to me to be bordering on superhuman self-control.⁸⁹ ‘It depends on how long it takes me to get the sluices open. The rituals are fairly simple, but it’ll take a while before I can get it done on my own.’ She glanced around the room, looking vaguely baffled. ‘Now if I was an incense burner, where would I be?’

‘Tayber,’ I voxed, trying hard not to sound too impatient. ‘Get the artisans up here. Felicia needs a hand.’ I glanced at her a trifle apprehensively, wondering if I’d crossed some kind of line, but she simply nodded.

‘That might help.’

‘Good,’ I said, as evenly as I could manage, which was quite an achievement under the circumstances as I’m sure you’ll appreciate. ‘If it does, how long until the tunnel’s clear?’

‘About two hours,’ Felicia said matter-of-factly. ‘That’s after we get the

sluices open, of course. But that shouldn't take more than an hour or so, if we can perform the rituals cleanly and invoke the Omnissiah's blessing on our first attempt.'

'You've got less than twenty minutes until we're up to the fundament in greenskins,' I pointed out, as patiently as possible, hoping that putting it into words wouldn't make it somehow inevitable. 'In three hours' time we'll all be dead... A lot sooner than that, probably.'

'I can't change the laws of theology,' Felicia snapped back. 'If we open the sluices safely, that's how long it'll take to drain. You'll just have to hold them off until we're done.'

'We'll try,' I said, as resolutely as I could, trying to mask the terror and despair that threatened to overwhelm me even as I spoke. 'Are you sure there isn't anything you can do to speed things up?'

'Positive,' the young tech-priest replied. She gestured towards one of the long boards of instrumentation, full of flickering dials recording information, which meant nothing to me. 'We'll have to move with extreme caution. If this place has been left unattended for weeks all kinds of systems are going to be unstable. A mistake now could be catastrophic.'

'Catastrophic would be infinitely preferable to dead for sure,' I said, a half-formed thought beginning to take root in my mind. 'What exactly is the problem?'

'In terms you can understand?' Felicia's voice was taking on an unmistakable edge of asperity, clearly nettled at my presumption in meddling with things best left to the Omnissiah's annointed. She pointed to a row of indicators, all glowing with a dull, hellish red. 'The power to run this place, and the surrounding villages, is generated by turbines at the base of the dam. When the current isn't being drawn, it's stored in capacitors, and no one's been drawing power since the orks invaded. That means they're fully charged, overloaded in fact, and extremely unstable. If we open the sluices fully, without taking the generators off line and draining off the excess charge first, they'll go up like a bomb. Is that clear enough for you?'

'Very clear, thank you,' I turned and hurried from the chapel, Jurgen at my heels as always, activating my comm-bead as I went. 'Sautine, how quickly can you retarget the Basilisk?'

'It'll take a few minutes,' the tank vixen said, sounding slightly confused, but trusting my judgement nevertheless. 'What's the new target?'

‘The sluice gates at the base of the dam,’ I told her. ‘Can they depress the barrel that far?’

‘If they can’t we’ll tip the thing over,’ Sautine assured me, clearly grasping the point at once. ‘Planning to give the greenies a bath?’

‘A bit more than that, I hope,’ I said, gaining the open air just as Felicia’s artisans pelted past in the opposite direction, like over-excited juvies. The mountain chill struck hard as I emerged, reminding me that my shirt was still uncomfortably clammy, but there was no time to worry about that now. I hurried to the edge of the piazza, where Sautine was encouraging the Basilisk crew to slew their ungainly artillery piece, with a steady stream of profanity.

‘Almost there, commissar,’ she assured me over the grinding of tracks as the driver nudged it round by increments, attempting to line the long barrel up with the plume of water emerging from the foot of the dam.

‘So are the orks,’ I reminded her. Even as I spoke, a crackle of las-fire and the bark of heavy weapons opened up to greet the first greenskin vehicles to reach the other side of the dam. They were bike things for the most part, easy targets even at this distance, and their return fire was predictably inaccurate, downing very few of our own. A couple tried to race across the causeway towards us, the first erupting in a vivid ball of flame as one of Luskins’s rockets found its mark. The one behind it hit the wreckage, bounced, and careered over the parapet, its rider clinging grimly to the handlebars all the way down, until he suddenly transmogrified into an unsightly stain on the spillway.

‘Block the road,’ the tank commander ordered her units, and the Leman Russes opened up almost as one, belching flame and smoke from the barrels of their battle cannons, their lasweapons sparking and cracking, so that from where I was standing they seemed to be the centre of a small, but very intense, thunderstorm. The fury of it burst fully on the greenskins packing the narrow road opposite, blowing vehicles and passengers to pieces with equal abandon, no doubt regretting their eagerness to pull ahead of their fellows by taking the highway instead of lurching into combat across the open ground below. That reminded me. I glanced down, finding the whole valley floor seething with greenskins as far as the eye could see, like a bowl of maggots left festering in the sun.

‘Open fire!’ Piers ordered, as calmly as he could under the circumstances, and troopers and irregulars alike opened up with their small-arms, pouring

as much fire as they could down the slope.

A human army would have thought twice at that point, I have no doubt, but true to form it merely seemed to enrage the orks. With that bone-jarring yell of '*Waaaagh!*' which I had come to detest so heartily (and still do, come to think of it, even after all these years), they began swarming up the slope, abandoning their vehicles, which had finally reached a degree of inclination they couldn't climb. And a good thing too, or their heavy weapons would have made short work of us, of that I have no doubt. They could still have done us a great deal more damage than they did if the gunners had held their positions and laid down covering fire, but being orks of course they didn't, abandoning their vehicles with the rest of their confederates and joining that hideous, unstoppable charge.

Rank after rank of them fell to our guns, but they just kept coming, trampling their casualties underfoot in their eagerness to close, with a complete disregard for their own safety. No human troops, apart from Astartes I suppose, could have sustained that assault, forging up so steep a slope, but the greenskins charged on as though they were crossing a sporting ground, barely hindered by the incline.

'Keep firing!' I yelled. The Leman Russes swept the road opposite with their heavy bolters, chewing apart the surviving greenskins, while a couple of burning trucks effectively prevented any more of their number from moving up and attempting to assault us across the top of the dam. Unfortunately, they couldn't depress the sponson-mounted weapons enough to engage the green wave slogging so determinedly towards us up the slope, and we were forced to rely on what man-portable heavy weapons could be brought into the fray. The onrushing tide of death was close enough for some of their wild firing to make it over the lip, and I ducked behind the Basilisk, as what seemed like a mixture of bolter and stubber rounds began to whine through the air around me.

'That was a bit close,' Sautine observed, dropping into cover behind me.

Not everyone else was so lucky. A couple of nearby troopers went down hard, and if I was any judge they weren't likely to be getting back up again.

She raised her head cautiously. 'What the hell does he think he's doing?'

'Emperor alone knows,' I said, spotting Ariott at almost the same time she had. The little man was scuttling forwards, crouching low in an attempt to minimise his target profile, clearly intent on tending to the casualties, despite the near certainty of joining them if he did so. I activated my comm-

bead. 'Team Tarvil, cover the vet.' Tarvil waved an acknowledgement, and his militia team switched the focus of their fire, concentrating on wherever the bulk of the rounds continuing to riddle the air around Ariott were coming from. Not that firing to suppress would have any effect on the greenskins of course, but they might get lucky, and tripping over the corpses of the front rank would probably throw the survivors' aim off a bit.

'We're lined up,' the Basilisk commander informed us, and I became aware that the slab of metal I was sheltering behind had stopped moving. The barrel swung down, grating against its rest. 'That's as far as we can depress.'

'Let's hope it's enough,' I said.

The first orks had become visible now, scrambling over the lip of the slope into a wall of las and autocannon fire, falling in droves as they did so, the ranks behind simply hurdling the casualties and rushing forward in their eagerness to engage. They fell too, but far too many of them were getting up again, their staggering resilience keeping them on their feet and on the attack, despite wounds which would have killed a human three times over.

'Grenades!' Tayber ordered, and fountains of ork viscera erupted behind the front ranks, but even this wasn't enough to stem the tide.

'Then stop reaming about and fire the frakking⁹⁰ thing!' Sautine ordered, with remarkable restraint under the circumstances. The artillery crew hardly needed any more encouragement, and the long-barrelled Earthshaker briefly lived up to its name, the booming of its discharge echoing around the enclosed valley even over the noise of the battle around us. I parried a strike from an axe-wielding ork with my chainsword, taking its arm off at the wrist, and left Jurgen to finish it off with his lasgun while I turned to stare at the dam.

The shot was on target, a testament to the skill of the Basilisk's crew, detonating on the spray-slick wall a hair's-breadth above the plume of water jetting out onto the spillway below. A gout of pulverised rockcrete erupted from the surface, and as I raised the amplivisor my aide handed to me, stepping over the corpse of the ork he'd just shot to do so, I thought I could see the volume of the outflow increasing.

'Again,' I ordered, although it was hardly necessary, the hard-pressed gunners already ramming another shell into the breech even as I spoke.

'Ciaphas!' Felicia's voice was shrill in my comm-bead. 'What in the name of the Omnissiah do you think you're doing?'

‘Saving you some time,’ I riposted, any further comment I might make drowned out by the booming of the Basilisk and the abruptly truncated whine of its shell in flight. With the trajectory so flat, the sound of its detonation was almost instant, rolling into the echoes of its firing, like a double thunderclap.

This time, there could be no doubt that the shot had found its mark. The jet of water from the spillway more than redoubled in the wake of the gout of rubble which erupted from it, and the ork units slogging along the edges of the diminished river found their feet getting wet as the trickle of water they’d been skirting widened to the limits of its banks. Within moments, they were chest deep, a torrent of water sweeping back down the suddenly full watercourse, taking the unwary with it in a rush of flailing limbs and loose equipment.

‘That’s washed a few of them out of our hair,’ Sautine commented with satisfaction, drawing her sidearm to shoot an axe-wielding greenskin in the face as it rounded the corner of the Basilisk, bellowing its monotonous warcry and looking for something to kill. I took its head off with the chainsword as it fell, just to be on the safe side. However tough they were, I’d yet to see one getting up from that.

To my amazement, I noticed Ariott out of the corner of my eye, still not dead, dragging one of the injured troopers to safety with a sublime disregard for the screaming greenskins. Tarvil’s militia rabble were continuing to drop all around him.

‘Didn’t you understand what I just told you?’ Felicia demanded, sounding remarkably agitated for a member of a sect dedicated to the overcoming of simple human weaknesses like getting overexcited about things. ‘We haven’t even begun to take the generators off-line yet, never mind draining the capacitors—’

‘Good,’ I said, choking her off in full flow. ‘Any idea how big the bang’s going to be?’

‘Big enough to compromise the integrity of the whole structure,’ she said grimly, as though that were a bad thing. ‘You’d better just hope...’

I never did find out what I ought to hope, because at that point my most optimistic wishes were well and truly fulfilled. With a low rumble uncannily reminiscent of a hivequake deep in the sump, the outflow of water increased in volume by what seemed like a thousandfold, accompanied by chunks of rockcrete the size of Chimeras, which crashed

down into the valley below, squishing a gratifying number of greenskins as they did so.

‘Emperor’s blood!’ Sautine expostulated. ‘The whole reaming dam’s collapsing!’

She was right too, the blank wall becoming crazed with stress fractures, through which new torrents of water began to jet. With ponderous slowness, the whole edifice began to crumble, the pent-up pressure of the fluid behind it straining for release. Abruptly, an entire section of it seemed to vanish, to be replaced by a solid wall of water, tens of metres high, which began roaring down the valley below us, scouring it clean of the greenskins that infested it. Vehicles and orks alike were engulfed in seconds, with no time to flee even if the press of their fellows behind hadn’t made that impossible; picked up and whirled away like specks of refuse in a gutter.

A few of the brighter ones, if that term has any meaning when applied to orks, tried to reach safety on the higher ground, but that meant running into the barrage of fire our defenders were still pouring back down the slope. Though taken as much by surprise at the unexpected deluge as the orks had been, most of our people still had the presence of mind to keep shooting, their morale much improved by the abrupt turn of events in our favour.

‘Keep at them!’ I yelled, flourishing my chainsword in an appropriately heroic fashion. ‘Drive them back!’

The Perlians responded with enthusiasm. Denied reinforcements, the vanguard of greenskins, which had made it through our lines, suddenly found itself outnumbered, cut off, and swiftly annihilated.

With a roar which made everything I’d heard up to this point pale in comparison, a sound so loud that I felt rather than heard it, the rest of the dam finally gave way, torn apart by the torrent ripping its way through the breach. Drenched by the spray, which felt freezing in the chill mountain air, but at least went some way towards diminishing the stench of the servitor’s vital fluids still soaking my shirt, I watched in awe as the whole valley filled with tumbling grey water, flecked with foam, and the entire ork army abruptly vanished, swept away as though it had never been. Confident that the few bedraggled survivors that remained would be swiftly mopped up by our exultant host, I turned to Sautine with as much insouciance as I could muster.

‘Well,’ I said, straightening my cap, ‘that went about as well as could be expected.’

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Editorial Note:

Cain's impulsive action was to have unexpected consequences for both the course of the war, in the short term, and the entire segmentum in decades to come. A closer examination of the part he was to play in these later events must perforce await the completion of my work on subsequent volumes of the archive, but for a brief and substantially accurate overview of the effect his destruction of the dam in the so-called Valley of Daemons was to have on the campaign to cleanse Perlia I, turn once again to Kallis's popular history of the invasion.

From Green Skins and Black Hearts: The Ork Invasion of Perlia by Hismyonie Kallis, 927 M41

As Cain's Heroes⁹¹ continued their unstoppable march towards victory and the Imperial lines, the intelligence analysts watching their progress through their orbital sensors began to appreciate the full magnitude of his achievement. The forces of the Liberator had become such a severe thorn in the side of the enemy that resources, which had previously been used to press the attack on the fiercely-contested land bridge linking the two continents, were being diverted to deal with them. Not, so far, in sufficient numbers to materially weaken the ork onslaught, but enough for their absence to be noticed. That was all to change after the momentous events in the Valley of Daemons.

We can only imagine the anguish the watchers of the high command must have felt at the sight of that gallant band apparently walking into an ambush designed to destroy them, their seemingly suicidal decision to take a last

stand in that desolate and ill-named declivity, and their subsequent complete disappearance.

Cain's bold and unexpected decision to destroy the dam was to have wider strategic implications than he could possibly have realised at the time. Believing his followers lost, killed in the very act which saved them, the Imperial commanders lost no time in taking full advantage of the havoc he'd wrought on the forces occupying the Eastern continent. By the time the flood the Liberator had unleashed had subsided, after scouring its way through the valleys of the foothills, over seven thousand of the greenskin invaders had perished.⁹² With the belated arrival in orbit of three Imperial Guard troopships, the Imperial commanders had their first chance since the commencement of the invasion to counter-attack, and they seized it eagerly, deploying their dropships to surround and slaughter the remaining ork strongholds in the occupied zone.

Ironically, by the time the first Guard regiments had arrived on the desecrated soil of Eastern Perlia and begun winning it back corpse by greenskin corpse, Cain and his allies had already embarked on the next stage of their journey, still completely unaware of the fact that they had just tipped the balance of the entire campaign in favour of the forces of the Emperor.



TWENTY-THREE

‘You were lucky,’ Felicia said shortly, still vacillating between righteous indignation at my cavalier treatment of a Mechanicus shrine and mere human relief at the fact that, thanks to my having done so, she was still alive enough to be annoyed about it. I was standing at the edge of the piazza, looking down a damp and weed-encrusted ramp, wide enough to have taken three of our vehicles abreast (although fortunately no one seemed keen to try the experiment; when we moved out we would do so in single file, keeping as far from the precipitous drop to our right as we decently could), which terminated on a flat platform beneath the towering and somewhat corroded tangle of metalwork masking the tunnel we’d come here to find. Felicia was already mounted up on her power lifter, preparing to remove the massive intake grilles, which blocked the road through the mountains, although since she hadn’t started the engine yet we were able to have a relatively normal conversation without needing to go through the vox-circuits. ‘If we hadn’t managed to get the incense lit before you pulled that little stunt of yours, Ommissiah alone knows what might have happened.’

‘Well thank the Emperor you were able to invoke its protection in time,’ I said, as politely as I could. In my experience, His Divine Majesty tended to be rather too busy keeping the galaxy spinning to waste much time looking out for my welfare, which is why I took care of the matter so conscientiously myself, and I strongly suspected that the same held true for his clockwork counterpart. Nevertheless, it couldn’t hurt to be on the safe side. I pointed at the latticework of metal below us, a dozen metres wide and half as high, with as much casualness as I could muster. ‘Can you really get that lot down?’

‘No problem.’ As I’d expected, being faced with a technical challenge focussed her mind so much that she forgot she was supposed to be in a snit with me. ‘They’re sectional. We only need to remove a couple.’ She fired up the engine of her modified Sentinel, and clanked down the moisture-slicked slipway to inspect the aqueduct up close. I turned away, content to leave her to it, still trying to assimilate the sudden change in both our fortunes and the landscape surrounding us.

The lake had gone, replaced by a deep gouge in the mountainside where only a short time before the placid waters had lapped almost at our feet. Now it was a scene of utter desolation, the floor and sides of the declivity caked with thick, stinking mud, which ceased abruptly at what had formerly been the waterline. Above this the variegated scrub I’d noticed on our drive up the highway to the dam still grew, a vivid contrast to the stench of decay which now permeated everything around us. A thin, silver trickle was the only thing relieving the monotony of that drab bowl of filth, the river which had been held back to form the reservoir having resumed its former course. It meandered gently down to the tiny pool backed up behind the stunted remains of the dam’s foundations, trickled over them, and flowed on through the line of the watercourse the road had paralleled, before we had so peremptorily reordered the landscape.

Nothing much remained of the valley below the site of the dam either, the scouring flood having torn away plants and soil almost down to the bedrock. Stark new outcrops loomed grey and grim over the shattered remains of the roadway by which we’d ascended. Returning the way we’d come clearly wouldn’t be an option, even if I’d been inclined to try it. I strongly suspected we’d deterred our pursuers for some time to come, but I’d learned never to underestimate ork tenacity, and turning up somewhere they wouldn’t expect still seemed like the best course of action to me.

‘Bit of a mess,’ Piers said, materialising at my elbow. Lost in the contemplation of the destruction we’d unleashed on the peaceful landscape below, I hadn’t heard him approach. I nodded soberly. ‘It was the only thing to be done,’ I said.

The young captain shrugged. ‘I suppose they can always build another one,’ he said prophetically, blithely unaware of the hideous consequences that little project was going to have for me a few years further on, and handed me the data-slate he’d been carrying. ‘I’ve got the casualty figures, if you’d like to take a look at them.’

They were better than I'd feared and worse than I'd hoped, as usual, so I adjusted my expression to an appropriately grave one, and praised their noble sacrifice like I was supposed to. I was about to hand it back when one of the names caught my eye.

'We lost Kolfax?' I asked, surprised to find how much that affected me. He'd hardly been the most likable member of our little band, and in all honesty his use as a guide was more or less at an end, but he'd been solid and reliable within his limits.

Piers nodded. 'Took a stubber round through the chest when they rushed us; Ariott did his best, but...'

'Quite,' I said, falling into a matching stride with him. About a dozen shrouded silhouettes were laid out next to the ambulance, in what seemed to me to be a staggeringly insensitive gesture given that that was where our wounded were being patched up, but Ariott and the corpsmen were being rushed off their feet looking after the living. The dead would just have to wait their turn. I gestured to the scoured valley beneath us. 'At least he took one hell of an honour guard with him.'

'I'm sure the Emperor's giving him a pat on the back right now,' Piers said, in the tone of a man who thought no such thing. His platoon sergeant trotted by, bent on some errand of his own, and the young officer called him over, clearly grateful for the distraction. 'Vyner, can you organise a burial detail?'

'No problem, captain.' The stocky sergeant saluted perfunctorily, and began rounding up nearby troopers with the brisk efficiency common to senior NCOs throughout the galaxy. 'I need some volunteers. Tuffley, Bel, Hyland...' Leaving him to it, we turned back to Ariott and his makeshift aid station.

'Commissar.' The little man glanced up as we approached, his habitual demeanour of affability tempered now with evident exhaustion. The two field medics we'd acquired along with the ambulance were still going about their business, patching up fractures and puncture wounds with practiced assurance, and an air of palpable relief which subliminally assured me that the worst was over and they'd moved on to the walking casualties. 'I'm afraid we're a bit busy at the moment.'

'So I see.' I glanced pointedly at the stretcher cases laid out in the back of the ambulance. There were more of them than it had been designed to carry, so a couple of the less severely hurt had been bedded down on the floor. 'I

must admit, after seeing you in action this morning I'd half expected to find you hitching a ride in Kaeti yourself.'

'Oh. That.' To my astonishment he actually blushed. 'I couldn't just leave them there, could I?' Well I would have done, at least until the noise had stopped, but admitting as much would hardly have helped morale. Instead I nodded gravely.

'Of course not,' I said. 'If you were a Guardsman I'd put you in for a commendation. But try to remember you're indispensable next time, will you?' If anything, that only seemed to increase his embarrassment, although for the life of me I couldn't see why.⁹³ To prevent the entire conversation bogging down in platitudes, I indicated the crowd of wounded troopers and irregulars. 'Any idea how long it'll be before you're ready to move?'

'Another hour or so,' Ariott said, evidently grateful for the change of subject. He indicated the queue of walking wounded, the tail end of the triage process, and shrugged wearily. 'We're on to the superficial stuff now. Most of these will still be able to fight after a hot meal and a bit of rest.' He nodded towards the ambulance. 'We've got twenty severe cases, four of them critical. I'll talk to Norbert about transferring the most stable to another vehicle before we pull out, so we can tend to the worst more effectively.'

'Good man,' I said, running the numbers in my head. With twelve dead, that meant we were down thirty-two effectives. Not a bad trade-off for a whole army of greenskins, but a noticeable dent in our ranks, nevertheless. Fortunately, as always, the irregulars had taken most of the damage, so we hadn't lost that many trained soldiers. I had a sneaking suspicion we'd need all the warriors we could get before this was over.

They wouldn't do us an awful lot of good if they didn't have enough ammunition left to fight with, of course. The thought was sufficiently sobering for me to seek out Norbert as soon as I'd left the makeshift aid station, after a few more encouraging words for our medics, intent on clarifying the issue. The scrivener was right where I'd expected to find him, in the middle of our logistical train, arguing with Sautine about precisely that issue.

'You'll just have to redistribute the remaining shells between the tanks,' he said. 'We've got one more pallet on the ammo hauler we can break up as well, and that's your lot. If it's any consolation, the Earthshaker rounds for the Basilisk are gone completely, apart from what they're carrying

themselves.’ Overhearing that, my blood ran cold. My time with the 12th Field Artillery had left me familiar with the details of these weapons,⁹⁴ and I knew that the artillery crew could only have had a handful of shells left. If my gamble had required any more shots to breach the dam, we might not have made it.

‘Right, fine.’ Sautine sounded distinctly unhappy about it. ‘Looks like we’re back to conserving ammo until we can re-supply.’

‘That shouldn’t be too long,’ Norbert assured her. ‘If this tunnel comes out where the tech-priest thinks it does, we’ll only be about twenty kilometres from another dump.’

‘In a region crawling with greenies,’ Sautine said. ‘What do you want to bet that it hasn’t been gutted?’ So far, we’d been lucky, only a couple of the caches we’d reached turning out to have been looted before we got there, and Norbert’s skills had been more than equal to the task of eking out our dwindling resources until the next one. But once we were through the mountains we’d be entering a region where the bulk of the ork forces were concentrated, and the chances of those sorely needed supplies having gone unnoticed in the interstices between mobs would be greatly reduced.

‘Then we’ll just have to steal it back,’ I said, trying to summon the air of calm assurance a commissar was supposed to project at all times.

‘Ah well, ream it,’ Sautine said, ‘we’ve got this far.’ She shrugged, and turned back to Norbert. ‘I’ll send someone over for whatever you’ve got.’

‘What about fuel?’ I asked, as she disappeared. If we weren’t able to get the tanks as far as the enemy then lack of ammunition would be the least of our problems.

The bureaucrat smiled thinly. ‘We’ve got enough,’ he said, in tones, which warned me I didn’t want to know how tight the margin was. I took the hint. After all, he was the expert. ‘You heard about the heavy stuff, I suppose?’

I nodded. ‘Sautine’s voice does tend to carry when she gets excited,’ I said dryly. The air reverberated to a loud, metallic clang, which resonated up through the rockcrete beneath my boots. Evidently Felicia had just succeeded in removing the first of the filter covers.

‘It does.’ Norbert nodded. ‘The good news is we’ve still got plenty of ammunition for the small-arms and the support weapons. If that fails we can always go back to the orkish stuff.’ The weapon mounts of our captured vehicles had been refitted with more familiar, reliable and safe Imperial kit, but we’d kept most of the original stuff anyway. Partly because Felicia was

fascinated by it, declaring that half of it shouldn't be working at all, and partly as insurance: if we had to fall back on captured ork ammunition in order to fight, it would be just as well if we had something to hand capable of firing it. I nodded in agreement.

'Food?' I asked.

'No problem there,' Norbert assured me, although I hadn't expected there to be. Since leaving the desert, we'd been able to live off the land to some extent, supplementing our rations nicely, and we still had plenty in stock. He smiled, with a trace of good humour. 'You might have let us fill up with fresh water before you gave it all to the greenskins, though.'

'A generous heart is the gift of the Emperor,' I quoted,⁹⁵ and he laughed.

'Well, there should be plenty more where we're going,' he said.

This was a prediction that was to be borne out remarkably quickly. After our painstaking progress of the last few weeks, the transition through the aqueduct went astonishingly smoothly. The few tens of kilometres we travelled beneath the mountain range passed in a matter of hours rather than the days it would have taken us to scabble our way over the peaks, even without ork interference, and I began to feel as close to relaxed as seemed possible under the circumstances. The tunnel ran on smoothly beneath our tracks, the beams of our luminators diffused by the tendrils of mist which rose from the moisture permeated rockcrete, the echoes of our passage rolling back in on us as we passed.

From time to time, I caught brief glimpses of ancillary pipework, and other equipment which meant nothing to me, embedded in the walls, along with access hatches disturbingly reminiscent of the one Karrie had conducted us through aboard the *Hand of Vengeance*, before the chill and monotony of the surroundings (not to mention the unremitting racket) drove me back inside the Chimera. The mingled odours of Jorgen and recaf greeted me, and I took the mug gratefully, feeling the warmth spreading down my fingers. Happy as I usually was to find myself in an underground environment, at least when no one was shooting at me, I was beginning to find the experience a trifle dull.

'Thank you, Jorgen,' I said, and went to take a look at the auspex display. Orilly shied away from the mug of hot liquid in my hand, not unnaturally given that the Chimera isn't generally noted for the smoothness of its ride, allowing me a clear view of our progress. 'How are we doing?'

‘Nearly halfway already, sir.’ The bespectacled auspex operator indicated our position on a tactical display, the icons strung out like the beads of a rosary, the command Chimera comfortably near the middle of the formation. Felicia, I wasn’t surprised to note, was almost at the front, only the Salamanders ahead of her. The chances of there being any orks in the tunnel ahead of us were remote to say the least, but my paranoid streak was working overtime. The nearer we got to safety, the more concerned I seemed to feel that we wouldn’t make it after all, that my luck was running out, and disaster was waiting just around the corner. (A state of mind the next hundred years or so didn’t exactly do a lot to alleviate, come to think of it. At least these days the worst I have to worry about is keeping my cadets up to the mark, and the petty-minded idiocy of some of my colleagues.⁹⁶)

‘Perhaps we should rest up before we go too much further,’ Piers suggested, and I nodded, thinking the same thing. ‘If we send a scouting party on ahead to clear the way, we should be out the other end before the greenskins even know we’re coming.’

‘Works for me,’ I agreed, leaving it to him to issue the appropriate orders. ‘The tech-priest will need some time to get the grilles down anyway.’ From what Felicia had told me, I’d half expected the aqueduct to feed us straight into the blades of the generator turbines, which by all accounts were considerably bigger and more impressive than the ones we’d blown to bits at the top end, but she’d simply laughed at that.

‘There’s an access gate upstream of the turbine chapel,’ she’d explained, ‘so the maintenance crews can get in here from the other end. All we have to do is keep an eye out for it, and crank it open when we get there.’

‘And if the greenskins have found it first?’ I’d asked. Felicia had simply shrugged.

‘Then we’ll know about it one way or the other,’ she’d assured me. We weren’t being assaulted by solid waves of screaming orks, which I took as a good sign, and Orilly’s auspex was comfortingly clear of contacts, so, on the whole I thought we were doing rather well. Of course, if I’d known what was waiting for us on the other side of that mountain, I’d have found myself a nice quiet little cleft in the rock, and never come out at all.



TWENTY-FOUR

We rolled to a halt shortly before dawn, the thin grey light of the dying night seeping through the scrollwork of the ornately wrought entrance gates covering the access ramp that Felicia had mentioned. Like most of our number, I'd passed as many hours of our passage through the mountain as I could in fitful sleep, being a sufficiently seasoned campaigner to do so pretty much anywhere, but I still felt stiff and weary as I hauled myself out of the Chimera and went to join her. To my vague surprise, she was on foot as well, the power lifter idling gently a few paces away.

'This is it,' she confirmed as I approached her, tilting her head to look up at the gates. They were a lot less impressive than the intake grilles at the top end had been, and the ramp was considerably narrower, but it looked tall and wide enough for the tanks and artillery piece to get through unimpeded, so that was one worry I could safely dismiss.⁹⁷ 'Get these open and we're home free.' Apart from the army of greenskins standing between us and safety, of course, but I preferred not to think about that.

'Good,' I said, expecting her to hop back aboard the power lifter and simply rip our way clear with the handling claws, but instead, she beckoned her artisans over and started setting up a little brass dish on a tripod. One of them (I never really worked out which was Aldiman and which was Lyddi) tipped some foul smelling powder into it and set fire to the heap (which made it smell a whole lot worse), while the other handed her a little vial of oil. Felicia made the sign of the cogwheel over it and started dabbing it on the gate with the tip of her mechanical tail, in locations which seemed completely random to me, but which no doubt held some arcane significance for the tech-priest, muttering under her breath as she did so. After a moment she looked up at me.

‘This is going to take a while,’ she said. Fighting down the impulse to simply order up a couple of demo charges, since I supposed the least I could do after blowing up her precious dam was to let her get on with this in her own way without interference, I nodded gravely and returned to the command vehicle.

‘The supply dump should be here,’ Piers said, indicating its position on the mapslate.

Even enlarged to maximum resolution, the site still fitted on the same screen as our current position, though only just. ‘We should be there in an hour or so. Maybe less if the going’s good.’

‘And the greenskins leave us alone,’ I added. The young captain nodded.

‘Perhaps we should send the scouts out first. If there’s no enemy activity we can move on at once. If they’re all over the place we can lie low here and assess our options.’

‘Cornered like rats in a waste pipe.’ I didn’t like the thought of that one little bit. Trapped down here we’d be slaughtered if the orks discovered us. Our only chance if it came to combat would be to spread out, where we could bring the full force of our combined firepower to bear.

Piers nodded. ‘I appreciate the point you’re making, but if they don’t know we’re here in the first place...’

‘If they spot the scouts they’ll know someone’s about,’ I pointed out. ‘I think we should be prepared to move out as soon as they report. If it’s clear, we’ll head for the supplies. If not...’ I shrugged. ‘We’ll just have to make it up as we go along.’

‘Well, that seems to have worked so far,’ Piers conceded.

In the event, it didn’t take Felicia as long as I’d feared to get the gates open. After half an hour or so, they slid smoothly back, opening the way to the surface, and our trio of Salamanders shot up the exit ramp like sump rats up an outfall. Thin yellow sunshine leaked into the tunnel as they cleared it, raising everyone’s spirits, and I began to feel an unfamiliar sense of claustrophobia. With Jurgen at my shoulder, his lasgun held ready for use as usual, I walked up the slope, blinking as I finally emerged into the open air. Since we hadn’t heard any firing as the scouts set off, I assumed it was safe, an impression confirmed a moment later by their leader.

‘Outrider one,’ my comm-bead said crisply. ‘No enemy contact. Heading on to the objective.’ I let Piers deal with the message, listening to the brisk exchange with half my mind, while the rest of it savoured the sensation of

warmth and clean air. Down on the fringes of the coastal plain, the temperature was appreciably warmer, no doubt to Jurgen's well-concealed distaste, and the contrast to the dankness of the tunnel was invigorating.

'Bring them on out,' I ordered, standing aside to let the steady stream of vehicles rumble up out of the bowels of the mountain, fully taking stock of my surroundings for the first time.

We'd emerged onto the roof of a huge building, the size of a modest cathedral, from which a road, uncannily similar to the one by which we'd reached the reservoir, descended, cut into the flanks of the mountain itself until it reached the wider highway leading up to the main entrance dozens of metres below. This in turn led off from a well-paved dual carriageway, clearly a major transport artery in happier times. After a moment's thought, I was able to identify it as one of the main overland routes converging on the peninsular, along which commerce had formerly flowed between the two continents.

Instead of the valleys and surrounding peaks which had encircled us before we'd begun our descent through the bowels of the earth, the landscape fell away below us in a vista of low, rolling hills, which gave way in turn to the flat, coastal plain. Raising the amplivisor my aide had thoughtfully handed to me, I found I could see beyond even that, to a flat, sparkling expanse of water.

'We've reached the sea,' I said, scarcely able to believe it.

Of course there were a few score kilometres still to go before we actually got our feet wet, not to mention the peninsular to get across, but I'd never really expected to get this far at all, and the sight of open water left me feeling vaguely disorientated. Jurgen nodded, evidently as pleased as I was to be getting close to our goal.

'We'll be there in no time,' he agreed.

Well that was something of an underestimate, but by the time our scouts reported in we'd formed up the column again, and Norbert had dispatched a few of the civilians to replenish our water supplies from the pool below the outfall from the turbines. In deference to the fact that we were now in even more hostile territory than before, we'd adopted a defensive formation, but for all the activity we saw we might just as well not have bothered. I briefly considered ordering Tayber to set some demo charges and collapse the tunnel behind us, just to make sure we were safe, but the chances of any

greenskins following us seemed as remote as ever, and an explosion that large might have attracted precisely the sort of attention we were hoping to avoid. Besides, I didn't see anything to be gained from hacking Felicia off again. I was standing outside the command Chimera, enjoying another recaf and a hot grox bun Jurgen had somehow been able to find for me, when the call came through.

'Outrider one,' their leader reported. 'We have a visual on the target. Enemy is holding, but it seems lightly defended from this direction.'

'Can you be a bit more specific?' I asked, hurrying inside and across to the tactical display, where Orilly was already busy overlaying the positions of the enemy on the largest scale map of the site we could project.

The scout commander cleared his throat.

'We're transmitting co-ordinates of all the enemy units we can see. They're dug in towards the west, facing outwards.' In other words, they were facing the Imperial lines, evidently braced for a full-scale offensive over the peninsular. No doubt our own forces were mirroring this disposition on the other side; attempting to assault in force across that narrow land bridge would just result in a traki shoot.⁹⁸ Since neither side could reasonably expect to get enough troops through that gauntlet of death to fight effectively, both armies had been stalemated there ever since the defenders had pulled back across it.⁹⁹ (Although orks being orks they'd tried it a couple of times before getting the message, and were biding their time until they could build up their forces enough to absorb the losses on their next attempt.) How we were going to manage the trick for ourselves was an issue I preferred to think about later. Perhaps by that time we'd be close enough to the Imperial lines to vox a warning of our approach. Marquony was listening out on all the usual frequencies, but so far hadn't been able to pick up anything intelligible, and none of us felt like chancing a long-range transmission of our own so deep inside enemy held territory. 'In this direction there are only a few outlying pickets.'

'We could take those easily,' Piers said speculatively, and looking at the display, I had to agree. They could hardly have made it any easier for us if they'd tried. The supply dump itself was set back from the road, in a minor depression in the wall of the last valley we'd have to traverse to reach the coastal plain. The mouth of the valley had been closed off by dug in defenders, all their heavy ordnance obligingly pointing in the other direction, out towards the west, while only a few scattered sentry posts held

the line in the direction we'd be attacking from. Clearly, the notion that any Imperial units might get behind them, and strike from the east, simply hadn't occurred to the orks. (To be fair, there was no reason why it should: so far as they knew the entire continent was completely under their control.)

'We could.' I followed the line of the highway with my eye. If we moved fast enough we'd be through those flimsy defences and in amongst them before they even knew we were there. Assuming the supplies hadn't been cleaned out already, we could detach a portion of our force to take the compound, while the main body of the formation punched on through to hit the main body of the defenders from behind. With them gone, we might just be able to make it to the land bridge without too much harrying fire from our rear. It was an intoxicating prospect, and I forced myself to remain calm, looking for any obvious flaws in the plan. I pointed to the chain of fortifications cutting off the mouth of the valley. 'These might be a bit harder to crack than they look.'

'Nothing Sautine and the mortar teams can't take care of,' Piers said cheerfully. 'They've enough ammo left for that. And if the greenies aren't still sitting on the stash, why go to so much trouble to guard it?' The palms of my hands tingled a little as I considered that. It seemed an awful lot of trouble to go to just to protect a few huts full of ammunition.

'It looks to me as if they're fortifying the valley mouth for its own sake,' Tayber volunteered. He shrank the scale of the map. 'If a counter-attack from the Westernlands made it across the plain, they could sweep up here towards the pass, flanking the defences they're bound to have in place along the primary routes.'

'Makes sense to me,' I conceded with relief, my doubts receding. It certainly looked plausible on the map, and just how catastrophically wrong he was, we had yet to discover. I stilled my breathing, trying to project an air of calm deliberation. 'Well then, gentlemen, I think we have a plan.'

It wasn't quite as straightforward as that, of course, the process of ordering our column and hammering out the details taking some time, but the Emperor seemed to be with us for once. Greenskin traffic on the highway below seemed light, even compared to what we'd encountered in the desert (which I suppose should have forewarned me of what we were about to get into, or at least dropped a little hint, but I was so keyed up that it never occurred to me to question our apparent good fortune), and the few ork

aircraft which flew over us were either too high to distinguish our true nature or otherwise engaged in dogfights with our own pilots.

The first time we saw a squadron of Thunderbolts in the skies above our heads, a spontaneous cheer erupted, the conviction that we were almost home sweeping the length of the convoy, and buoying our spirits even more than the prospect of victory. No one was taking our success for granted, of course, least of all me, but the sense was growing within us that the battle we were about to join would be, if not the last we'd have to face, the single most decisive encounter of our long trek to safety. In this we were, of course, entirely correct, but in a fashion none of us could possibly have predicted.

Despite all the delays, we were finally ready to pull out just before noon, the armoured spearhead of our advance leading the way, our mechanised infantry following up, and the motley collection of ork scrap crewed by the whooping irregulars buttressing our rear and flanks, forming as much of a protective screen as they could around Kaeti, the supply wagons, and the other non-combatants. After some thought, I'd abandoned the command Chimera, leaving it to Piers to lead the assault on the main defences, and hitched a lift with Tayber and the remains of Bravo squad in a standard pattern vehicle. The supply dump was bound to be more lightly defended, or so I thought, and I'd elected to lead the raid on it in person.

'You don't need me holding your hand,' I told the young captain, who visibly swelled with pride at this expression of confidence (and to tell the truth he wasn't a bad commander for PDF). 'You've been doing this sort of thing since before I got here, and the supply post might yield some useful intelligence.'

Piers nodded. 'Then that's where you should be,' he agreed, with almost indecent haste, clearly relishing the prospect of hogging all the glory. So far as I was concerned, he was welcome to it too. Give me a nice quiet little sideshow where I can keep my head down any time.

I'd begun our journey with my head out of the top hatch, relishing the fresh air (even more so given that Jurgen was riding along with us as usual), only ducking below to finalise things with Tayber as we approached our target. The rest of our *ad hoc* raiding party was clustered around us: one of the ork trucks, almost empty apart from its driver and heavy weapons crew (who to my distinct lack of surprise turned out to be Demara and Tamworth, eager as ever to volunteer for a chance to play with their favourite toy), a

buggy containing the rest of Team Grenbow,¹⁰⁰ and Felicia's power lifter, which trotted along next to us like a faithful hound, its white-robed pilot waving cheerfully whenever she caught my eye. I'd tried to dissuade her from joining us, feeling that this was a matter for experienced fighters, but she'd been as adamantly stubborn as before, insisting that she would be more likely to locate the supplies we needed than anyone else, and that loading them once she'd done so would go a great deal faster with the aid of the lifter. Not being able to muster a counter-argument to either point, which convinced even me, I'd eventually acquiesced with as much good grace as I could summon up.

'Everyone clear on the plan?' I asked, glancing around the tense faces in the Chimera's passenger compartment.

Tayber nodded. 'We go in as soon as the shooting starts, suppress all resistance, and grab what we can before they regroup,' he said.

'Sounds good to me,' Felicia's voice over the vox sounded as cheerful as ever. Grenbow chimed in with an acknowledgement too, on behalf of his split forces, and I took a deep breath, despite Jurgen's close proximity.

'Right then,' I said. 'Let's do this.'



TWENTY-FIVE

At first, our plan worked like a charm, the ork picket lines swept away by the speed and ferocity of our advance with almost as much gratifying suddenness as the ones we'd given a swimming lesson to the previous day. As we passed the burned-out hulk of a greenskin battlewagon, the irregulars in the vehicles surrounding us cheered loudly enough to be heard even over the racket of the ill-tuned engines, which drowned out virtually everything else.¹⁰¹

'Raiding party stand by,' I ordered over the comm-bead, my head back out of the top hatch again. I'd grown used to following our engagements on the C3¹⁰² systems in the command vehicle, and felt cut off without them; so despite the marginally greater risk of stopping a stray round, I'd been unable to resist the urge to supplement the clipped reports I'd been getting through the tiny transceiver in my ear with my own eyes. Our driver throttled back, ready to peel off as we approached our objective, and Felicia grinned at me, keeping pace easily aboard her mechanical steed.

'After you, oh fearless leader,' she said cheerfully, with the complete disregard for proper vox protocol I'd come to expect, and demonstrating beyond all possible doubt that tech-priests are lousy judges of character.

'Acknowledged,' Grenbow said, his clipped tones holding more than a hint of reproof.

'Peeling off,' I reported to Piers, or to his vox man at any rate, and Marquony acknowledged at once.

'Confirm that, commissar.' He switched frequencies, co-ordinating the main attack on the defensive positions with Sautine and some of the other unit commanders. The Basilisk had pulled over, ready to drop some long-range ordnance on the targets to divert their attention just before the main

armoured wedge started taking them apart, and the mortar teams had hitched a lift in the no doubt uncomfortably overcrowded Salamanders to flank them and start picking off the infantry from the neighbouring high ground.¹⁰³

A moment or two later, the main engagement began, and the walls of the compound were looming up ahead of us. The rest of our ragtag convoy surged past the fortifications, startled greenskin faces appearing over the ramparts as they went by, and I gave the order to go in. As I did so, I noticed a column of greasy black smoke rising in the distance. It seemed our first blow had been successfully struck.

Like the desert installation we'd first discovered, the supply dump had been constructed with local conditions in mind. Instead of a collection of prefabricated huts, we found ourselves facing a compound walled in some locally quarried stone, to a height of around two metres. This alone would have seemed intimidating enough, but the greenskins had reinforced it, piling up an untidy collection of scrap and detritus on top of the solid construction, much of it carved into barbarous totems reminiscent of the glyphs on the map I'd found shortly after crashing in the desert. I suppose Jurgen might have been able to hazard a guess at their meaning if he'd had a chance to see them, and save us no end of trouble as a result, but of course there was only room for me in the top hatch. The original gates had been patched with chunks of scrap metal, no doubt repairing damage wrought in the ork assault to take the place, but that wasn't going to slow us down much either.

'Take the gates,' I ordered our gunner, and the multi-laser in the turret crackled furiously, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as it ionised the air around itself. They blew apart in a gratifying display of pyrotechnics, the heavy bolter in the hull mount opening up as well, sending molten fragments spinning away as the explosive projectiles chewed apart the greenskins gathered behind it.

'Sweep the walls!' I commanded, and Demara opened up with her beloved autocannon, scything down the orks trying desperately to bring their own weapons to bear. Some managed it, a ragged volley pinging from our armour plate and making me duck reflexively below the level of the hatch, but they didn't have time to improve their aim. With a roar like a carnifex clearing its throat, Felicia discharged her flamer, sweeping the battlements from end to end with a gout of burning promethium. Much of the makeshift

crenellation had apparently been carried out in wood, which continued to burn merrily along with its would-be defenders as we surged on past them to carry the fight to the enemy.

With a crash that reverberated through the sturdy armoured frame of our vehicle, we rammed the remains of the gates off their hinges, and slewed around looking for targets. The hull-mounted lasguns began to crackle too now, echoing the pop and snap of the blaze above, but without the accompanying screams, Tayber and his men evidently feeling that just because they were stuck inside they needn't miss out on all the fun. I looked round, trying to orientate myself, and as I did so the breath left my body in a single horrified gasp. Something had clearly gone very badly wrong.

The layout of the compound was just as Tayber's data-slate had described it: parallel rows of low, slate-roofed buildings constructed of the same grey stone as the walls, ranged about a central quadrangle. There had been nothing in the documentation about the open space being stuffed with ork buggies, however, a couple of dozen of them at least, not to mention the scores of greenskins swarming out to meet our unexpected attack.

'Oh frak,' I said. Felicia bought us a little more time by sweeping another dragonsbreath along the front rank of bawling barbarians, laying down a barrier of burning fuel which even the most aggressive of them would balk at attempting to cross, but there seemed no end to them, and even as she did so, another mob was swarming into our rear. 'Get clear! Get us out!' Our driver attempted to comply, but even as he did so a crude rocket impacted against our right track, shredding it. With a thrill of horror, I heard the grinding of metal as the guide wheels ran free of it, bedding down in the hard-packed dirt as we slewed to a halt.

The buggy, which had been the last vehicle of our detachment to enter the compound, almost made it out again before the driver went down to a hail of typically random small-arms fire. This time, however, it was so dense the greenskins could hardly avoid finding a target. The vehicle spun out of control, mowing down several of its attackers as it did so, before crashing into the grey stone wall of one of the buildings. Grenbow and his team just had time to stagger from the wreckage before a horde of howling, axe-wielding greenskins descended on them.

They gave a good account of themselves, all things considered, managing to get off a few shots as the enemy closed, but they never had a chance against so many. A couple of the onrushing greenskins staggered, las bolts

impacting on the crude armour they wore, but that was all the militia team was able to achieve before being overwhelmed. In a frenzied display of bestial savagery, my men were literally hacked apart before my horrified eyes.

‘Piers! We need extraction now!’ I voxed.

‘Sorry commissar, we’re a bit bogged down here ourselves,’ Piers replied after a moment. ‘We’ll get someone back there as soon as we can disengage.’ By which time I’d be another collection of bloodied chunks, probably. The orks were turning now, and would have swarmed all over us there and then if one of Grenbow’s still-twitching subordinates hadn’t somehow managed to trigger a grenade he was carrying, in a last desperate act of posthumous vengeance.¹⁰⁴ The sudden explosion took them completely by surprise, blowing a couple off their feet (although I had enough healthy respect for their resilience not to take it for granted that they wouldn’t be getting back up again) and sending them turning back to face this sudden and unexpected apparent threat, with the speed of striking serpents.

That brief moment of distraction was my salvation, or so it seemed at the time. Before I even knew I was moving, I was out of the hatch and running, keeping behind the barrier of burning promethium, and heading for the shelter of the nearest wall. It was only as I gained it that I realised I’d put the crippled Chimera, the raging inferno, and the bulk of the ork host between me and the gate.

At least that afforded me some concealment, however. So long as the orks concentrated on the visible targets, I might be able to slip away unobserved. Tayber had evidently decided to remain behind the armour plate, potting away with the hull-mounted lasguns, while the gunner did whatever damage he could with the heavy stuff. Not enough, in my judgement: it could only be a matter of time before the immobilised vehicle was destroyed. Even as I watched, a party of orks ran forward, carrying demo charges little smaller than the cover of the hatch I’d so recently vacated. Just as it looked as though they were going to clamp them to the hull, they went down, the roar of Demara’s autocannon audible even over the howling of the greenskins and the crackle of the burning fuel.

Engine screaming, the ungainly ork vehicle we’d commandeered so many weeks before charged towards the stranded Chimera, the two gunners laying down fire all around them, clearly intent on reaching the survivors

inside. For a moment I felt sick. It seemed my reflexes had betrayed me, and that I'd impulsively put myself beyond the reach of rescue.

That impression lasted no more than a moment, however. Two more of the crude rockets struck the onrushing truck, and a fusillade of bolter and stubber fire clattered off its roughly welded armour plate. Demara pitched backwards, a bloody crater where the tattoo on her cheek had been, most of her brain following the projectile out through the back of her skull. Tamworth seized the trigger even as she fell, attempting to keep up the rate of fire, only to be cut down in turn, what looked like a bolter shell ripping his ribcage apart. I have no idea what happened to the driver, but I strongly suspect it was nothing good. The abused truck flipped over and rolled, crushing a few greenskins as it did so, but not nearly enough for my liking.

'Look out, sir.' A lasgun cracked behind me, and I turned, my nose already registering a familiar odour. Jurgen stood there, his lasgun raised, and a greenskin with a large hole through its head was lying face down in the dirt a few paces beyond him. 'That one nearly had you.'

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, inexpressibly pleased to see him. No doubt seeing my feet disappear through the hatch he'd simply followed, reasoning that his place was at my side, and under the circumstances I wasn't about to argue with that. If you're going to find yourself surrounded by screaming, blood-maddened orks, take my word for it, there's no one better than a Valhallan to have at your shoulder, and there was no Valhallan I'd rather have than that particular one. Jurgen nodded, glancing at the carnage I'd just witnessed with his usual expression of bovine placidity.

'You're welcome, sir. Bit of a mess, isn't it?'

'I'm afraid it is,' I said, drawing my chainsword with as much of an air of resolution as I could muster. My laspistol, I noted absently, was already in my other hand, no doubt drawn by reflex as I sprinted from the doomed APC. I glanced around, but there was no sign of any help. The beleaguered Chimera continued to act as a fire magnet, the only thing, I have no doubt, which prevented the surrounding greenskins from charging forwards and swamping it. As it was, ork marksmanship proving just as much of an oxymoron as ever, they seemed to be doing more damage to one another than to the sturdy armour plate, misses and ricochets taking almost as great a toll among their number as the steady and disciplined fire of the besieged defenders. There was no sign of the modified Sentinel, so I was able to hope that Felicia had made it to safety at least.

As so often when death seems inevitable, I found a curious sense of fatalism beginning to overcome me; something I've noticed on many occasions, and which I'm certain is a facet of the acute survival instinct which, against all odds and expectation, has left me sitting here almost a century later in a quiet study with a glass of amasec and a data-slate to record these memoirs for posterity. (Not that posterity will ever actually read them, of course, Amberley or someone like her will make damn sure of that, so Emperor knows why I'm even bothering; but since I've not been near a confessional since the schola turned me loose on the galaxy all those years ago, and entering one now would probably give Nute¹⁰⁵ an embolism, it's one way of trying to make sense of it all I suppose.¹⁰⁶) Anyhow, time and again I've noticed that when your chances of living through the next ten minutes seem problematic at best, you tend to shorten your perspective, looking for ways to survive the next few seconds, and if that works the few after that. That probably accounts for the fact that my next move might have seemed counter-productive in the wider context of where we were and what was happening around us, but unquestionably bought us the next few seconds of safety in which to look around for another strategy to prolong our lives by another instant or two.

'This way,' I said, heading for the dubious cover of a pile of gutted machine parts, and glancing back at the one-sided battle raging behind us. We scurried along behind the nearest building, and emerged in a relatively quiet space between two more, on the fringes of the open area where the ork vehicles had been parked. Something seemed different about them compared to the examples we'd seen (not to mention blown up or appropriated) in the last few weeks, and I looked a little closer, trying to make out what it was. They were certainly no better maintained than the average, or cleaner, but the armour plate seemed heavier, and most of them had been ornamented in some way. Gaudy banners or grisly trophies hung on poles, or were draped around the weapon mounts, and most of them carried crudely daubed sigils like the ones I'd noticed above the gates. I pointed them out to Jurgen, who, after all, was probably the nearest thing to an expert on these creatures and their customs in the immediate vicinity. 'What do you make of that?'

My aide shrugged. 'Nobs,' he said, as though that explained it. After a moment I recognised the orkish word he'd used before in trying to explain their system of command and organization (which basically boils down to

the biggest and nastiest one gives the orders, and everyone else agrees or gets eaten,¹⁰⁷ which I suppose isn't that different to a lot of human institutions when you come to think of it). He pointed to a couple of the banners. 'There seem to be several different ones here.' My bowels clenched as the implications of that seemingly casual remark began to sink in.

'You mean we've blundered into the middle of some kind of command post?' I asked.

My aide nodded. 'Looks that way,' he agreed. Before he could elaborate, the door in the building we were standing next to burst open, violently enough for the wood to split, and the biggest, meanest ork I'd set eyes on since landing on Perlia charged out, bellowing, clearly intent on taking on the humans who had been rash enough to invade his headquarters in person. Fully a head taller than the bodyguards flanking him, who were themselves larger and more muscular than any other greenskins I'd yet seen, he loped forward like the vicious predator he was. A formless sense of recognition flickered in the rear of my terror-numbed cortex for a moment, and then everything fell into place.

'Oh nads,' I said. 'It's bloody Korbul.' Perhaps it was the sound of my voice, or maybe he scented Jurgen, but that huge, tusked head snapped round to glare in our direction, and with a bellow which shook my very bones, the biggest and nastiest ork in the entire sector charged straight at me.

Time slowed, seeming to stretch every second, as it so often seems to when my combat reflexes kick in. Had I not got my chainsword already in my hand, he might well have overwhelmed me by the power and ferocity of that rush, but all the practice I'd put in aboard our lifepod and the combats I'd been through since we got here came to my aid, and I evaded that first attack by what seemed at the time to be a miracle. I even had time to put a few shots into his torso with my laspistol, and Jurgen managed to crack off a few as well, but for all the good it did, I might just as well have been throwing rotten fruit. The las bolts expended themselves harmlessly against the grinding plates of scrap metal encasing his limbs and torso, and I just had time to register that however crude the armour he was wearing seemed to be it was undeniably effective, before he was on me, striking out with a mechanical claw apparently grafted to one arm of his metallic carapace.

It was only as I ducked away from it, my counterstrike eliciting nothing

more effective than a stream of sparks, that the full implications of that hit home. With a thrill of horror even more acute than those I'd experienced so far, I realised that the armour was powered, like something the Astartes or the sororitas might wear, and that the other arm boasted a built-in cannon of some sort with a barrel which looked to my panic-stricken eyes large enough to have poked my head inside.¹⁰⁸

If Korbul had summoned up the wit to fire at me, it would all have been over in seconds, but perhaps fortuitously he'd been so overwhelmed with rage and bloodlust that the thought had clearly not occurred to him. So I continued to dodge, hewing away futilely with my shrieking chainsword, searching desperately for a vulnerable point, while the metal-clad behemoth darted after me with a speed and precision completely at odds with its bulk, its metallic claw snapping and slicing like a tyrannid lictor, bellowing curses and threats in harsh gutturals which made me very glad I didn't speak orkish.

'Jurgen,' I shouted. 'For the Emperor's sake shoot the frakker!' Not that it would have done the slightest bit of damage of course, but I might have been able to take advantage of the momentary distraction to find an opening or an avenue of escape.

'I can't, sir.' My aide had us both in his sights, and I was certain I could put Korbul's bulk between us so he could get a clean shot, but something about the way he spoke forestalled me from repeating the order. He would do so if I did, I was certain, but he knew these beasts, and if he thought it was a bad idea... 'The others will rush us if I do.'

It was only then that I realised the warboss's entire entourage was hanging back, watching the combat like gamblers around an underhive fighting pit instead of piling in as I'd come to expect their kind to do. Clearly they were reluctant to interfere, although for the life of me I couldn't see why.¹⁰⁹ That wasn't really the issue at the time though, the only thing that mattered was winning, and then getting the hell out of there before our audience got bored with passing round the caba nuts and took a hand themselves.

Just about the only thing I could see that wasn't armoured was his face, so I struck at it, aiming a thrust right between his bloodshot little eyes, deflecting my aim at the last possible moment towards the vulnerable point Jurgen had shown me just above the bridge of his nose. Fast as I was, Korbul was faster, his inhuman speed and ferocity boosted even more by the powered armour he wore, and he blocked the strike easily, grabbing the

shrieking blade with the claw thing, actually bellowing with laughter as the sparks flew around us as whirling adamantium teeth met whatever alloy the claw was composed of.

Slowly, despite every iota of strength I could pump into my arm, he began to push the blade back towards me. I flinched, as though ducking away reflexively, and he came on, putting his whole weight behind it, enjoying his sadistic little game like the hate-fuelled scumsucker¹¹⁰ he was. His face leered into mine as he closed the distance, cloacal breath making me gag, thick strands of drool slithering from the corners of his mouth with each bark of merriment. His hangers-on echoed the sound, although whether from genuine amusement or self-preserving sycophancy I couldn't have said.¹¹¹

'That's right. Get a good close look!' I encouraged him, suddenly slackening my arm and pivoting out of the way of the descending blade, as I'd intended to all along. With my other hand, I rammed the barrel of my laspistol deep into his eye socket as hard as I could, bursting the orbit and spattering myself with mingled blood and goo.

Korbul howled in rage and pain, but before he could even begin to react I pulled the trigger several times. The las bolts ripped through his brain, what there was of it, and burst against the thick metal meant to armour the back of his skull, pureeing the contents in a most satisfactory manner. Not wanting to be crushed to death in the moment of victory, I leapt out of the way, while what felt like a quarter of a tonne of meat and scrap metal subsided to the ground in front of me with the ponderous inevitability of an avalanche.

Silence descended, apart from the crackle of gunfire in the distance, which indicated that, despite all the odds, Tayber was still making a fight of it. If anything, the noise in that direction seemed to have increased. A score of ork faces stared across the handful of metres separating us, all bearing identical expressions of imbecilic astonishment, even by greenskin standards. I began to shuffle backwards.

'Hold your ground, sir,' Jurgen advised, following his own counsel. I retrieved my sidearm with a moist sucking sound, and did so. He knew more about greenskins than I did, and he hadn't steered me wrong yet. 'If we run now they'll be on us like fleas on a hound.'

'And if we stay put?' I asked grimly.

I didn't have to wait long for an answer. One of the onlookers, bigger and

meaner than most, but still noticeably less impressive than Korbul had been, bellowed what sounded like a command, and pointed in our direction. My aide never moved, however, so neither did I, just flourishing the chainsword a little to clear the detritus off it, and pointing the laspistol at the shouter, hoping it wasn't too badly gummed up with bits of warboss to fire properly.

'I'm not sure,' Jurgen said, which was far from encouraging. 'But my dad always said—' His voice was drowned out by another bellow, from a different ork, clearly none too keen on taking orders from this upstart. Within seconds, the whole bunch of them were arguing like juvies in the playzone, and being greenskins it didn't take long for the dispute to become physical. The first shot was fired a moment or two after that, and within seconds the squabble had become a vicious free-for-all.

'Ciaphas. Over here!' a familiar voice called, and I suddenly became aware of Felicia's power lifter idling near the corner of the building. One of its handling claws was gone, the other bent, and she was grinning wildly. Hosing down the squabbling greenskins with the flamer just for good measure, she stalked across to us, and waved cheerfully from inside the cockpit. 'That was a pretty good trick with the pistol there. I thought he had you.'

'So did he,' I said, trying not to think about how close I'd cut it. 'That was the whole point.'

'I'll show you the pics later,' she said, the first indication I had that she'd rigged up a data recorder in the cockpit along with the vox, although I suppose being a tech-priest it was pretty much inevitable. And quite handy too when it came to verifying our story, although if I'd known just how far those pics would end up being disseminated, and how much unwelcome attention it would draw to me in the long run, I'd probably have wiped them myself.¹¹² A thought seemed to occur to her. 'Those flames seem to be getting rather close to the vehicles. Perhaps we should move.'

'Perhaps we should,' I agreed, as the first of the parked buggies detonated behind us. I gestured towards the gate, where the chatter in my comm-bead suggested Piers had finally arrived with reinforcements and got Tayber out of his box. Despite this welcome intervention, there were still a few stray greenskins wandering around, and the Sentinel was a great deal more bullet-proof than I was. 'Ladies first.'



Editorial Note:

As is so often the case with these anecdotes, Cain's account of his adventures on Perlia concludes somewhat abruptly. I've therefore inserted a final extract from Kallis's book in order to provide a more satisfactory overview of the outcome, which I trust will fill in most of the blanks.

From *Green Skins and Black Hearts: The Ork Invasion of Perlia* by Hismyonie Kallis, 927 M41

Cain's audacious raid on the lair of the monster that had brought so much destruction and suffering to the people of Perlia was to prove the final nail in the coffin of the ork invasion. With Korbul dead, the coalition of ork tribes he'd led so successfully disintegrated almost at once into the usual maelstrom of internecine feuding, rendering them easy pickings for the Imperial Guard forces which were beginning to arrive in orbit in ever-increasing numbers. Within the year, Perlia had been utterly cleansed of the greenskin taint, only a few scattered starships remaining in system to continue their mischief,¹¹³ and the other worlds touched by their noisome presence had been similarly freed from their loathesome grasp.

It goes without saying that Korbul's whereabouts had always been a matter of great interest to the Imperial high command, and that orbital surveillance of his headquarters had been intense, so the Liberator's attack on it didn't go unnoticed for long. We can only imagine the astonishment with which the news of his intervention was greeted, astonishment which can only have been compounded by the realisation that it had been carried out by the mysterious fighting force which had been thought lost on the other side of

the mountains only the day before. Speculation about who these exceptional warriors were, and who led them, must surely have been intense. Both were questions which were to be swiftly answered.

With the ork forces now in total disarray, the high command lost no time in mobilising their forces for the long-awaited offensive across the peninsular. Now that the greenskins were unable to mount an effective defence, the forces of the Imperial Guard and the PDF fell on the barbarous invaders like a hammer blow, sweeping from victory to victory as they went, finally coming within vox range of the returning heroes. And for the first time, the people of Perlia were to learn the name of the man they were to thank for their deliverance, Ciaphas Cain, the Liberator.

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TWENTY-SIX

It wasn't all plain sailing after that of course. We still had the bulk of the ork army to get through before we reached safety, but as the news of their leader's demise began to spread the heart seemed to go out of them. Individually, they were still just as tough and ferocious as before, they were orks after all, but the cracks in their fragile alliance which Korbul had been able to keep welded together with the force of his personality (or whatever an ork warboss has instead), began to assert themselves almost at once.¹¹⁴ Several times on the last stage of our journey we found ourselves approaching what we thought to be a battlezone, only to find that the combatants were all orks, settling their differences in the time-honoured way of their kind without the slightest regard for the damage they were doing to their own greater cause as a result.

Not that we were complaining about that. The more of each other they killed, the fewer were left to get in our way. The more organised groups that we couldn't go around we punched straight through, aided in no small measure by the tactical updates we were beginning to get from the Imperial command net, which gave us a far better idea than we'd ever had before of what was lying ahead of us. In the process of accessing it, Marquony had finally managed to get through to someone among the Imperial forces, who bounced us up the chain of command with gratifying speed, until the vox man informed me with an air of faint incredulity that someone called Alcas, who turned out to be the divisional commander of the Westernlands, was waiting to speak to me.

'This is Cain,' I said, raising my voice slightly over the roar of the Chimera's engine, and projecting what I thought was about the right amount of commissarial dignity. 'How can I help you, general?'

‘A complete debrief would be a start,’ the voice on the other end said, with a faint trace of amusement. Never having spoken to someone of such an exalted rank before, except at the occasional reception, I was pleasantly surprised. ‘But that will have to wait. Can you confirm that Korbul is dead?’

‘He was when I left him,’ I said, realising that the more reticent I seemed now the more credibility I’d have when I managed to work out a story to explain why I’d made a run for it and blundered into him in the first place. The voice on the other end of the vox-link faded a little, and I caught enough to gather that he was passing on the confirmation to someone else in the vicinity. When he came back he sounded more genial than ever.

‘Your sergeant’s report states that you left a covered position to confront him in person.’ Well good for Tayber: he must have assumed I bailed out of the Chimera because I’d caught sight of the warlord. I couldn’t come up with anything better myself, so I might as well reinforce that impression.

‘Once I’d spotted him there wasn’t any time to think,’ I said, truthfully enough. ‘But I suppose on reflection it would have been more sensible to sit tight and wait for the reinforcements to arrive.’

‘Lucky you didn’t,’ Alcas said, sounding gratifyingly impressed. ‘I’ll look forward to hearing the full story when I see you. Our forward units ought to be linking up with you any time now.’

‘If the greenskins are obliging enough to get out of the way,’ I responded. I glanced at the updated tactical display. The first wave of Imperial troops was across the peninsular already, the ork defences swept aside by air strikes and a determined armour thrust. They’d lost little time in advancing, and I have to admit I was impressed by how quickly they’d broken through.¹¹⁵ As I took in the latest dispositions, the palms of my hands began to tingle in the old familiar and unwelcome fashion. ‘There seem to be rather a lot of them heading in our general direction.’ Not all of them were routing of course, at least not yet, but the ones who were seemed to be running straight towards us.

‘I’m sure after everything else you’ve had to deal with that won’t be much of a problem,’ Alcas said cheerily, and I forced my voice to remain neutral as I replied.

‘We’ll think of something,’ I said, acutely conscious that any other reaction would undermine my credibility to a dangerous extent, although inwardly I was cursing about as much as you’d imagine. I glanced up at

Piers, who was still basking in the success of our raid on Korbul's headquarters and seemed to think he was the greatest tactician since Macharius as a result. The young captain nodded seriously.

'We will,' he agreed.

In the end, the plan we came up with wasn't much of one at all, but it was the best we could contrive under the circumstances. We were well out on the coastal plain, running as hard and fast as we could directly for the salient occupied by our own forces, which was continuing to expand as they flooded across the peninsular. Fortunately we'd passed through the main concentration of agricultural lands to reach an area of relatively open moorland fringing the coast, over which our vehicles were able to make reasonably good time while maintaining a sound defensive formation (with me as close to the middle of it as I could manage, of course). As the bulk of the retreating greenskins closed with us, we pushed our armour forward, ready to punch our way through the weakest concentration of them that we could find.

The auspex informed me that this was something of a relative term. A positive blizzard of contact icons peppered the screen, and I stuck my head out of the top hatch in order to check with the amplivisor.

I soon wished I hadn't. As the chill coastal wind, redolent of salt and the sharp tang of seaweed, lashed at my face, I raised the vision enhancers, resolving the long, wavering line on the horizon into wave after wave of ork vehicles, packed with greenskin foot soldiers, all heading towards us as fast as they could. Well it was too late to change our minds now – trying to flee ahead of that onrushing torrent would be futile, and there was nowhere in that undulating, bracken-strewn landscape to mount a defence. Speed and power would be our only allies in this, along with the hope that the fear of the forces behind them would outweigh the impulse to stay and slaughter us.

'Break up the line,' I ordered, and our tanks opened fire at optimum range, blowing holes in the larger formations, while our anti-personnel weapons swept the ranks, trying to prevent the disrupted groups from coalescing again. Behind the vehicles, a second line of running figures, orks who'd been unable to hitch a ride, pelted tirelessly after their more fortunate fellows. Shells from our mortars, perilously mounted in the backs of open-topped vehicles, began to detonate among them, provoking the beserker charge I'd expected, and ahead of them the motley collection of trucks and

buggies began to accelerate in turn, their gunners firing in our general direction with their usual lack of accuracy.

‘Keep them dispersed!’ I urged, hoping to overcome the greenskins’ instinct to group action as we had in the desert all those weeks before. If we could do that, they might just keep going... One of our captured buggies exploded a few yards away from the hurtling Chimera, the victim of a lucky shot, and I ducked back inside as pieces of debris and its luckless crew pattered down around me. I hurried back to the auspex screen. ‘Is it working?’

‘Up to a point,’ Piers said, indicating the blips. Our attack had thrown the greenskins into disarray, there was no doubt about that, but they seemed to be regrouping in spite of our best efforts, and damnably effectively too. Even as we watched they took out one of the Leman Russes. Any moment now they’d zero in on the main bulk of the convoy, and it would all be over. I felt the bitter taste of bile in my mouth. After all we’d been through, to be baulked here, so close to safety...

‘Incoming aircraft,’ Orilly reported, pointing to a cluster of fast-moving blips, comfortingly tagged with Imperial icons. A few more friendly symbols were becoming visible on the fringe of the screen too, slower moving, presumably our ground units in pursuit of the greenskins. Perhaps the situation wasn’t quite so desperate after all. In spite of my instinctive caution, I peered over the rim of the hatch again, just in time to see the air strike arrive.

Three fast-moving dots, almost too swift for the eye to follow, plummeted earthwards, resolving into the familiar silhouettes of the Thunderbolts we’d seen before (or something pretty much like them). They howled over the ork lines like vengeful daemons, weapon pods sparkling like dew on a fresh summer morning, sowing death and destruction in their wake. A thick pall of smoke began to rise from the centre of the enemy formation, the dazed survivors milling around in abject confusion.

‘Head for the gap!’ I ordered, as our gunners targeted the survivors, mindful as ever of the necessity of keeping them from regaining a cohesive formation. (Or as cohesive as anything orkish ever got.) Our berserker charge, scarcely less desperate or insane than the ork one facing us, began to wheel, heading for the hole the Navy pilots had so considerately opened up for us. At the time, I just thanked the Emperor for the coincidence, little realising how closely our progress over the last few weeks had been

monitored, and how eager the upper echelons were to debrief us.

We continued to take fire as we closed, of course, losing a few more of the militia units and a couple of Chimeras,¹¹⁶ but the majority of our vehicles kept going regardless, doing at least as much damage as we took, if not more so. I saw an ork dreadnought take a shell from the *Vixen* full in the chest, exploding violently, and taking out a couple of nearby bike things as its ammunition cooked off.

Then suddenly we were among them, and I grabbed the pintle-mounted bolter, blazing away at anything green I could find. It was too late to duck back inside and let Jurgen take over, the few seconds that would take perhaps allowing the greenies enough of a respite to gather what passed for their wits and start shooting effectively at us again. Whether I actually hit anything, I've no idea, but it seemed to encourage our people, who kept the survivors hopping, and I gradually became aware that the clumps of sporadically shooting greenskins I'd been targeting had been getting fewer and fewer, and that there were no more of their ramshackle vehicles crossing my sights. Our gunner obliterated a final group with a burst from the multi-laser, and I suddenly realised we were clear of them.

'Friendlies approaching from the west,' Orilly reported, with a faint air of disbelief. 'No more enemy units in between.'

'We made it.' Piers patted me on the back as I ducked inside again, and a spontaneous cheer began to ripple around the battered survivors of our convoy. Well over half the troopers and most of the irregulars seemed to have made it,¹¹⁷ and as we coasted to a halt and Piers dropped the ramp they all seemed to be shouting my name.

'Well done, Ciaphas.' Felicia swung herself down from the cockpit of her Sentinel, which now looked even more battered than ever, and favoured me with the familiar mischievous grin. 'You've finally run out of orks.'

'And not before time,' I said, with some feeling. A familiar odour materialised at my shoulder.

'Recap, sir?' Jurgen asked, with his usual impeccable timing. I took the drink gratefully, and narrowed my eyes as a squadron of Sentinels came scurrying up to us. Something about the markings seemed familiar, and as they drew closer I breathed thanks to the Emperor. It was a long shot, but...

'Commissar Cain?' the squadron commander asked, clambering down to join us, his accent confirming the conclusion I'd just drawn. I nodded, returning his salute crisply. 'Captain Renkyn, 362nd Valhallan. We've been

sent to escort you in.’ He gestured towards the west, where the growl of Chimera engines was growing louder. ‘Is there anything you need?’

‘Medical supplies,’ I said at once, playing to my audience with the ease of a lifetime of practice. The captain relaxed a little, no doubt reassured by my display of concern for the troops. He nodded.

‘No problem. Anything else?’

I echoed the gesture.

‘Got any tanna?’ I asked hopefully.

[On which typically self-centred note, this extract from the archive comes to an abrupt conclusion.]

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FOOTNOTES

1. *I assume he means the years 920-929 here, since, due to his somewhat obscure origins, he had only an approximate idea of his chronological age. Not to mention the fact that his innumerable journeys through the warp confused the matter even further. Time spent in that peculiar realm having, at best, only a tangential relationship to its passage in the galaxy at large.*

2. *The officers concerned were actually local law enforcers rather than Arbites personnel, but like many seasoned travellers Cain often uses 'Arbites' as a generic term for all such functionaries. Given the number of worlds he visited, and the bewildering variety of local nomenclature encountered throughout the galaxy, he can hardly be blamed for this, although he tends to be more precise about the distinction in the instances where he had contact with actual members of the Arbites itself.*

3. *I had been delayed longer than expected dealing with the space hulk Dolorous Tidings, which had more than lived up to its name.*

4. *It was to take another year or so before the infestation was completely cleansed, but by this point the problem had diminished to a level where a large-scale Guard presence was no longer required, particularly with an ork Waaargh gaining momentum elsewhere in the sector.*

5. *Sergeant Phu, one of the local law enforcers present at Cain's encounter with the genestealers. His account of the incident in question, elsewhere in the archive, makes it abundantly clear that her relationship with him was far more than merely professional.*

6. The 12th, being an artillery regiment, was split into batteries, each roughly equivalent in administrative terms to a company in a line unit. Cain is typically vague about their disposition, but each appears to have consisted of around half a dozen Earthshakers, together with the support vehicles and personnel required for their proper functioning. The regiment also possessed a number of Hydras for air defence, but whether they formed a battery in their own right or were distributed among the others isn't clear from his account, and to be honest I can't be bothered to look it up in the official records. Cain seems to have been assigned specifically to the command battery rather than at regimental level, at least initially, but to have assumed overall commissarial authority for the regiment as a whole soon after his arrival. Presumably any other commissars attached to the 12th had failed to survive the tyranid onslaught on Desolatia.

7. I realised almost at once that Jorgen was a blank, one of those incredibly rare individuals with the innate ability to disrupt psychic or warp spawned sorcery. Or, to be more accurate, my psyker Rakel did, making the fact immediately obvious by becoming even more incoherent than usual and passing out on the spot.

8. When a particularly able or charismatic leader emerges among the greenskins, a Waaargh is the inevitable result. It's hard to translate the orkish term precisely, since it has a number of connotations, but the main ones are essentially a combination of migration and a destructive rampage, both of which seem instinctive activities among the species.

9. A remote system apparently named by a very bored explorer some time in M23.

10. The 12th, along with a couple of other Valhallan regiments, had been engaged in mopping up an ork raiding party when Cain first joined them, although by the time he did so the operation was all but over.

11. Ever since their homeworld was invaded by orks, with a conspicuous lack of success it must be said, the Valhallans have detested the greenskins more than any other of the Emperor's enemies.

12. Technically their liaison wasn't against regulations, as the Navy has its own commissars assigned to it, but if it had become known,

both their careers would undoubtedly have received something of a setback. That Cain was prepared to take such a risk is another pointer to his relative youth and inexperience. By the time I made his acquaintance he was considerably more circumspect.

13. This is one of many allusions to his early life, which he apparently spent on a hiveworld somewhere; although which one, and the circumstances in which he left it for the schola progenium, remain obscure.

14. From which we can infer that Cain's new friend was either of surprisingly high rank for her apparent age, or knew the ship well enough to be able to circumvent its security systems. Given that she, and apparently her parents, were born and brought up aboard it, the latter seems the most likely.

15. A torrent of liquid dropping from the upper levels of a hive, sometimes for several kilometres.

16. Something of a diplomatic simplification, I feel, having had personal dealings with witch hunters myself on a couple of occasions, but we'll let that pass...

17. Cain is clearly writing with hindsight here, since there would be no indication at the time of how the damage had been inflicted.

18. Contrary to the more lurid examples of popular drama, the human body can survive exposure to hard vacuum for several minutes before unconsciousness, followed shortly by brain damage and death from oxygen starvation, sets in. It helps if the blood has been well oxygenated by hyperventilation beforehand, of course, which given the state of panic Cain was apparently in at the time seems more than likely. Indeed, many naval veterans claim to have survived decompression during combat more than once, and I've experienced a similar situation myself on a couple of occasions, albeit assisted by augmetic enhancements.

19. Since escape pods, by their very nature, are inclined to violent acceleration, this is generally left for the occupants to do manually once they've orientated themselves. From his later remarks we can infer that Cain discovered how to activate this system shortly

afterwards, although he doesn't specifically mention having done so.

20. A species of animal found in the upper atmosphere of Blease's World. It metabolises hydrogen to remain aloft, where it browses on the innumerable plant spores flung out by the thick carpet of vegetation on the equatorial mountain ranges. The natives domesticated several strains millennia ago, harnessing gondolas to these vast, placid creatures, and using them as living dirigibles.

21. In all likelihood, none of the enemy vessels had weapons capable of engaging so small a target in any case, orkish ordnance not exactly being noted for its accuracy, and their fighter pilots would have been far more interested in engaging the starships or their opposite numbers from whichever imperial squadrons had managed to scramble before their carrying vessels were hit.

22. A popular holodrama of the 930s, about a squadron of fighter pilots in the Gothic War.

23. Indeed, the Brute-class vessel referred to earlier is built ('designed' being perhaps too alien a concept for the ork mindset) with precisely this form of attack in mind.

24. The ork Ravager Ardenuff, according to the final report of the commission previously cited. The name, incidentally, is an ork term most closely translated as 'battleready.'

25. Cain was, I can attest from my own acquaintance with him, an exceptional swordsman; much of that skill undoubtedly came from the sort of combat experience no amount of practice can emulate, but despite the impression he gives here, he was extremely diligent in this regard anyway.

26. Most of the Imperial Guard transmissions on the surface would, of course, have been too weak for the relatively unsophisticated equipment aboard the pod to pick up, leaving Cain with little to monitor other than the chatter between the ships in orbit and the few remaining orbital defence platforms.

27. Presumably because Korbul had run out of weirdboyz.

28. A common term for the cloud of comet debris marking the nominal boundary of a stellar system.

29. *Three freighters and two escorting Sword-class frigates.*

30. *More than likely. Orks aren't exactly noted for the length of their attention span.*

31. *Presumably he means the pod bounced a few times, and gouged out a furrow as it slowed. As so often in the task of editing these anecdotes, I've elected to let his original wording stand, in the interest of preserving their flavour, despite the ambiguity (and in some cases lack of comprehensibility) also being preserved.*

32. *Cain is exaggerating here. Even a fully-grown warboss (by definition the biggest and most aggressive type of ork) would be incapable of eating an adult human without reducing them first to bite-sized chunks. This, admittedly, wouldn't take it very long under most circumstances.*

33. *Presumably the sun was striking down through the open hatch. It would hardly have been able to make much impression on a hull insulated against the heat of re-entry.*

34. *In the light of current understanding of ork biology this seems remarkably prescient of Jorgen, although it's perfectly reasonable to assume that, over generations of warfare with the greenskins, the Valhallans had noticed that re-infestation rates were significantly lower where ork cadavers were disposed of in this manner and had adopted the practice without fully understanding why this should be the case.*

35. *A mildly disparaging nickname for tech-priests and engine-seers common among the Imperial Guard.*

36. *Which, since it was almost certainly carved by flash flooding during the infrequent heavy rains common to desert regions on most worlds, is hardly surprising.*

37. *It's an article of faith among greenskins that vehicles painted red are inherently faster and more manoeuvrable than others. Where insufficient paint is available to cover one completely, many ork drivers resort to this peculiar striping in an attempt to replicate the effect.*

38. *Or, to be more accurate, pictograms, concepts as sophisticated as*

writing *per se* being well beyond the grasp of the average greenskin.

39. From which we can infer that, despite his usual reluctance to immerse himself in the minutiae of the briefing materials provided by the munitorium, he had at least picked up an overview of the planet's geography.

40. A kind of tea made from the leaves of a plant native to the ice caverns of Valhalla. Cain spent most of his active service attached to regiments from that world, and acquired a taste for the stuff which was to last for the rest of his life. He only persuaded me to sample it once; the flavour is best described as 'distinctive.'

41. Given the speed with which Jurgen was able to dispatch the ork that fell into the pod we can reasonably infer that the weapons were already loaded, which, assuming a dozen powercells per box, would mean a total of six per gun.

42. Hardly surprising, as commbeads are intended for short-range use only, typically between the members of an Imperial Guard squad. The ability to send or receive over greater distances depends on being able to access a wider communications network, such as that of a company or regiment, in order to relay the transmission.

43. Kilometres, a common Valhallan colloquialism.

44. Highly unlikely in my experience, although the only thing you can say with any certainty about the species is that you'll always find a surprising exception to any general rule.

45. See the previous footnote about the distinction between local law enforcers and the Arbites itself. Here Cain is clearly referring to one of the former.

46. One of the smaller greenskins Cain referred to a few lines ago, a subspecies used by the larger, more powerful orks as a combination of slave labour, cannon fodder and emergency rations. Whether he learned the orkish term for these creatures from his subsequent encounters with them or the Valhallans he served with we can only conjecture, although he did have a basic working knowledge of the greenskin tongue by the time I made his acquaintance, enough of it to swear fluently, at any rate.

47. Highly unlikely: the average greenskin simply answers the call of nature wherever they happen to be, the notion of a specific place being set aside for such activities being too subtle a concept for them to grasp. As, indeed, is the notion of hygiene in general. If Cain is right about the use the building was put to, it was undoubtedly meant as a deliberate insult to His Divine Majesty.

48. Probably a battlewagon of some kind. Since the orkish names for most of their vehicles appear to be Gothic loan words mangled sufficiently for their debased larynxes to pronounce, such as 'trukk' for 'truck,' I've elected to let Cain's original wording stand rather than correct the terminology. Interestingly, according to the sisters of the Ordo Dialogus, this also holds true for much of their technical vocabulary, including most of their weaponry.

49. A world covered for the most part in dense tropical growth, most noted for its exports of timber and pharmaceuticals. Rainstorms are frequent, sudden, and sufficiently heavy to stun an unprotected man out in the open. The joke common on other worlds in the subsector, that the natives are secretly mutants with gills, is merely a piece of heavy-handed humour and utterly without foundation. The Ordo Malleus has, I'm reliably informed, checked.

50. Cain's apparent familiarity with mysteries generally reserved for the acolytes of the omnissiah may seem a little odd here; but my readers should bear in mind that the equipment he was working with was intended for everyday domestic use by common artisans, and would be both robust and simple as a consequence. Since we can also infer from a number of allusions throughout the archive that he was given to perpetrating practical jokes against the more strait-laced of his fellow commissar cadets at the schola progenium, he may simply have been adapting the lessons learned during these earlier pieces of mischief to rather more serious ends.

51. As ever, Cain tends to understate his abilities. Though the laspistol, like all handguns, is intended for use at relatively close quarters, I saw him take out an enemy well beyond its nominal effective range on more than one occasion.

52. Not entirely true, as the Commissariat has overall responsibility

for maintaining morale and proper discipline among all branches of the Imperial military, (with the obvious exceptions of the Astartes, the Adepta Sororitas, and the forces maintained directly by the Adeptus Mechanicus). Typically the PDF of a densely populated system, where the number of troopers under arms exceeds twenty or thirty million, will have a single commissar assigned to oversee it, while in most cases the luckless individual in question will have theoretical responsibility for overseeing the PDF assets of an entire subsector. It goes without saying that the majority of these commissars have been selected for the job as a result of disciplinary action, infirmity, or both, and that for the most part the troopers nominally under their jurisdiction can be forgiven for remaining blissfully unaware of their existence.

53. From which we can infer that one of Tayber's squad failed to survive the ork ambush back at the hydro station.

54. Probably not. Greenskin night vision seems to be superior to that of humans. In all likelihood it was simply a cooking fire that had got out of hand, or an act of wanton destruction perpetrated purely for its own sake.

55. Another Gothic loan word; the closest these debased creatures can come to pronouncing 'humans.'

56. As ever, Jurgen's presence appears to have been overlooked by most subsequent historians; probably because, with the best will in the galaxy, he was hardly the sort of figure you want cluttering up a heroic legend.

57. A fact, which to his credit, Cain found hilarious.

58. Local slang for people who lived or worked away from the townships scattered throughout the Perlian deserts, some of whom had perfected the art of survival in that desolate environment.

59. Probably in a restaurant on Keffia, where little biscuits containing slips of paper with pious platitudes on are unaccountably popular.

60. As commissars are outside the chain of command, Cain wasn't technically a superior officer. However, some soldiers salute them as a

matter of courtesy, or possibly prudence, and it's clear from his memoirs that many of the troopers he served with did so out of respect for his personal qualities.

61. How Cain discovered this we can only speculate; perhaps it came up in the course of a casual conversation. Or not.

62. Local law enforcers.

63. A forge world tradition, where the production facilities of a sector are closed down for routine maintenance, and the workers relocate en masse to a recreational facility.

64. Quite unlikely in actual fact, as the greenskins' innate tendency towards group action would mean that any isolated stragglers would either be on their way from one known location to another, like the one Cain encountered shortly after landing, or in search of loot, which would be scarce to say the least in the middle of the desert.

65. A popular ditty among pre-schola juvies in the sector.

66. A small rodent native to Kengraym Secundus, which migrates across the central continent in kilometre-wide, swarms devouring everything in its path. They breed in coastal inlets, spending the entire summer in the shallows, breaking into a run as they first scent the sea. In the course of this final frenzied rush the smaller and weaker members of the swarm are trampled to death (and then eaten).

67. A phrase common among engineers and junior tech-priests, expressing appreciation of a favour or considerate behaviour. The connotation appears to be something generally unnoticed but essential to keeping things running smoothly, which I suppose does sum Jurgen up rather well.

68. Cain was, in fact, to spend most of his career attached to Valhallan units.

69. Actually, just after dawn, the air would still be quite chill.

70. A familiar form of address often used by a senior NCO to the lieutenant in charge of their platoon, in the same way that their own subordinates might address them as 'sarge.'

71. A common sign of status among greenskins, presumably intended

to show that they've overcome something even bigger and nastier than they are.

72. Grasshopper is a game popular on most of the worlds in the Britannicus cluster, presumably so called because of the number of times the players leap into the air in an attempt to intercept the ball after it's been struck by the one with the bat. Its rules are arcane in the extreme, making little sense to anyone not native to one of the worlds where it's played. Matches have been known to last for anything up to a month, not counting stoppages for rain, which are frequent, and even then usually end in a draw.

73. Both, in fact, becoming lay brothers of the Mechanicus in later life.

74. In fact a few other survivors of the regiment surfaced later on, having continued their guerilla campaign in the south of the continent. Sautine and her crew had gravitated northwards after becoming separated from their parent company, which had been almost wiped out in the initial ork assault.

75. Since this is the first point in the narrative where Cain and Felicia appear to be on first-name terms, we can infer that they spent some time together which he hasn't bothered to record, although Emperor knows how either of them found the time for socialising.

76. Perhaps wrongly: some medevac units designate each vehicle in the formation with an identifying letter, often expanded into an arbitrarily chosen word for ease of pronunciation over the vox. For some reason, no doubt deeply embedded in the military psyche, feminine names are particularly popular.

77. The 597th Valhallan. As previously noted, his exploits with them make up the bulk of the material disseminated so far, and need not detain us any further at this juncture.

78. A species of proverbially timid ground-dwelling fowl, indigenous to the deep mountain valleys of equatorial Valhalla.

79. A reference to a peculiar annual ritual on several of the Imperial worlds coreward of the Damocles Gulf, in which life-sized dummies representing enemies of the Imperium are ceremonially burned on

communal bonfires. After which the local ecclesiarchs lead prayers of thanks for the Emperor's protection, and everyone else indulges in an evening of wild debauchery.

80. Evidently the nickname of the unit Sautine and her crew were originally attached to.

81. In fact Cain's status at this point was still officially 'killed in action.' His brief flurry of communication after making orbit should have changed this to 'missing, believed dead,' but thanks to the usual bureaucratic inertia of the Administratum this adjustment wasn't made until shortly after he rejoined his regiment. The ensuing confusion was to take over a year to sort out; after a few more such incidents the munitorium issued standing instructions that he should be kept on the active roster at all times whatever reports they received to the contrary. (Which accounts for the fact that he's the only person in the history of the galaxy to still be officially regarded as on active service subsequent to being buried with full military honours.)

82. The ork garrison in the town of Sandsedge was wiped out in the engagement, the Imperial column having taken them completely by surprise. They took some casualties themselves, of course, but by this time the steady trickle of newly contacted stragglers joining the group more than made up for the losses they sustained.

83. Probably around three hundred soldiers, if Cain is being literal, although as usual he's infuriatingly vague about specifics.

84. Technically, all such promotions conferred by a commissar would be subject to subsequent ratification by the munitorium, although, since to oppose the decision would be likely to attract commissarial attention to the objector, this would just be a formality in all but the most exceptional of circumstances.

85. Company Sergeant Major, the senior NCO of a company.

86. By this time Sautine's Leman Russ had been joined by two more tanks of the same type, a Basilisk, and a pair of captured orkish battlewagons apparently based on a looted Chimera chassis.

87. Cain is exaggerating somewhat: even a Warhound would have to kneel down in order to drop below the roofline.

88. If Cain is being accurate about this, rather than exaggerating for effect, we can infer a horde of anything up to two and a half thousand orks; a formidable prospect to say the least.

89. Unless she hadn't even noticed it. Tech-priests do have an unnerving tendency to concentrate on their mysteries to the exclusion of what, to the rest of us, would seem like more pressing concerns.

90. Presumably she'd picked up the Valhallan oath from Cain or Jurgen at some point during their journey together.

91. A widespread Perlian nickname for the members of Cain's ad hoc fighting force, first used as the title of a popular holodrama about their exploits, and which subsequently stuck. Cain himself disliked the production intensely, not least because of a wholly invented subplot in which one of the militia recruits has a clandestine love affair with him, and because, almost inevitably, Jurgen fails to appear at all.

92. Although at first sight this may seem like a gross overestimation, it is quite possibly accurate nevertheless. The network of valleys directed the floodwaters through the remains of several villages in which orkish garrisons were known to have been bivouacked, and the backwash probably accounted for the ambushing force waiting for the convoy further down the pass as well.

93. According to his autobiography, All Life Forms Large and Small, Ariott had acted purely on impulse without even being aware of how much danger he'd been in until afterwards. Ironically, neither of the troopers he'd attempted to save survived.

94. Presumably he means the Earthshakers themselves, which the 12th deployed on static platforms, relying on Trojan towing vehicles to move them about when required, rather than the self-propelled Basilisk variant which never appeared in their inventory. In either case, the artillery crews would normally have relied on ancillary vehicles to maintain ammunition supplies, the shot locker aboard the Basilisk being too small to contain enough shells for a prolonged battle.

95. From The Precepts of Saint Emilia: rather an unlikely tome for Cain to have taken to heart, given his frequently expressed and somewhat trenchant opinion of the pious, but her keen appreciation of

human frailty seems to have struck something of a chord with him, and several quotations from it appear in his commonplace book.

96. Somewhat ironic given that, as I mentioned in my preliminary remarks, this portion of his memoirs was recorded shortly before he was to be swept up in the momentous events of the Black Crusade.

97. Presumably it had been designed to allow easy access for whatever heavy machinery might be required to effect repairs to the aqueduct.

98. A Valhallan colloquialism, one of many, which Cain had picked up from his prolonged association with the natives of that world. The reference is to a species of animal generally too torpid for a hunter to miss, even at long range, and therefore not considered much of a challenge.

99. Cain is clearly writing with hindsight here, as at the time he would have had no knowledge of the prevailing strategic situation.

100. By this point the convention of naming the militia teams after the regulars commanding them seems to have become firmly established.

101. A factor, which probably contributed greatly to the element of surprise, the defenders not realising the approaching convoy was anything other than routine ork traffic until it was too late.

102. Command, Control and Communication.

103. It seems that out of habit, Cain was continuing to use his commissarial clearance to monitor the rest of the battlefield communications, thus getting a more general overview of events; which makes his single-minded concentration on his own experiences to the detriment of the wider picture even more frustrating.

104. In all likelihood he'd armed it before being struck down, and the timer finally gave out at this point.

105. The chaplain of the schola where Cain was appointed tutor of the commissar cadets.

106. An uncharacteristically introspective passage, which may point to a side of his character that he seldom acknowledges. Or perhaps it was the amasec.

107. Actually just killed, in most cases.

108. Clearly an exaggeration, as examples of this so-called 'mega-armour' in the possession of the ordo xenos, exhibit weaponry roughly equivalent in calibre to an Imperial storm bolter or autocannon.

109. By impetuously engaging Cain himself, Korbul had effectively made it a duel between the two of them which his captains would be reluctant to interrupt. To do so would be interpreted as an insult to the warboss, implying that he was too weak to win on his own, which in turn would be taken as a challenge to his leadership. Since they'd normally expect him to kill a pair of humans in short order, followed immediately by any presumptuous challenger, none of them would be willing to risk it.

110. An oath prevalent on the lower levels of many hive worlds, and extremely harsh by Cain's usual standards.

111. Probably both.

112. Felica's pict recording of the end of Cain's duel with Korbul had two effects: in the short term it provided unequivocal confirmation of the death of the warboss, which shaped Imperial strategy to best take advantage of the ensuing confusion among the greenskins, and in the longer term it made Cain a popular hero throughout the sector, particularly once the Commissariat decided to release it to the newscasts.

113. The last few raiders are believed to have been tracked back to their base on the fringes of the system and finally eradicated in the early 950s, although, as in so many things where the greenskins are concerned, it's hard to be entirely certain that they've been eliminated for good.

114. The loss of so many of his subordinate commanders, who in the normal course of events would have been tribal leaders in their own right, probably hastened this process of disintegration as their would-be heirs fell upon one another in the manner Cain described after Korbul's death.

115. Later analysis shows that the greenskin defences were rather less formidable than Cain's earlier remarks would indicate, having been

intended simply to deter an attack while their numbers swelled to a level sufficient to mount a successful invasion of the west. The Imperial forces had adopted a defensive posture at the other end of the peninsular largely because, with the entire eastern continent under orkish control, the effort required to cross the land bridge with the forces remaining to them would have been futile. Once the back of the orkish occupation had been broken, and beachheads established in the east by the newly-arrived Imperial Guard regiments, the strategic picture had changed completely, allowing an advance to take place relatively unimpeded.

116. The crew of one managing to hold out long enough to be rescued by the approaching Imperial forces.

117. All in all about seventy per cent of the group seem to have made it through this final skirmish, quite a remarkable achievement.

DUTY CALLS

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Editorial Note:

Cain has alluded on many occasions, in the portions of his memoirs that I have so far had time to edit and disseminate, to the fact that from time to time he became embroiled in Inquisitorial matters, usually at my behest. Not unnaturally the circumstances under which he became an active, albeit invariably reluctant, agent of His Majesty's most holy Inquisition have become a matter of some speculation among my fellow inquisitors, and it is with this in mind that I chose the following extract from the Cain Archive to circulate next. Here, in his own words, is his account of the first occasion on which I was able to make use of his somewhat dubious talents following our initial meeting on Gravalax a couple of years before.

Astute readers will realise that some elements of this present narrative were foreshadowed in my previous selection, Cain's account of his activities during the First Siege of Perlia. This extract, however, deals with events that occurred a dozen years later than that, early in his period of service with the Valhallan 597th; when Cain refers back to his previous experiences, it should be remembered that he's doing so with a considerable degree of hindsight (though not as much as he was to acquire later, during the Second Siege of 999 M41, at the height of the Thirteenth Black Crusade).

As always, Cain's account of events tends to concentrate on his own part in them to the virtual exclusion of any other considerations, and, as always, I've attempted to redress this by interpolating material from other sources whenever it seems appropriate. Unfortunately one of the most reliable, and least readable, eyewitnesses from this period of his career continues to be Jenit Sulla, whose redoubtable martial skills are once more unleashed on

the defenceless Gothic language. Readers possessing any more than the most rudimentary appreciation for literature may wish to omit these passages, feeling that the additional clarity they provide is scant recompense for the ordeal of wading through them.

Despite my own involvement in much of what follows I have resisted the temptation to comment directly at any great length, confining myself as usual to such footnotes and occasional other interjections as seemed appropriate, and breaking the original unstructured account into chapters for easier reading. The bulk of the narrative, as always, remains unadulterated Cain.

Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos

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ONE

If I'd had any hopes of a quiet life once we got to Periremunda, they didn't last for very long. Mind you, these things are relative. By the time we arrived the regiment had spent almost half a year in the warp, with only a few days spent in real space on Simia Orichalcae and a rather longer period being comprehensively debriefed by Amberley and her Inquisition lackeys on Coronus Prime after our unexpected return there,¹ so even the fact that the entire planet seemed on the verge of imploding into anarchy wasn't able to diminish the troopers' enthusiasm at finding themselves back on terra firma for the foreseeable future. In fact the prospect of getting stuck into a flesh and blood enemy, instead of the blank-faced metal horrors we'd faced on their frozen tomb world, was a positive bonus so far as most of them were concerned.

'At least these bastards can bleed,' Major Broklaw said, summing up the mood of the regiment in his typically forthright manner.

Colonel Kasteen, commanding officer of the 597th, nodded judiciously, concurring with her executive officer's assessment. 'Anyone know what they're revolting about?' she asked.

I shrugged. 'Haven't a clue,' I admitted. As usual I hadn't bothered reading the background briefing provided by the Munitorum, and, as usual, it seemed, I hadn't missed much. I knew that Broklaw was punctilious about such things, if only to save Kasteen the bother of wading through the verbiage herself by providing her with a cogent summary, and if neither of them was aware of the reason that half the planet seemed on the verge of erupting into armed rebellion the answer clearly wasn't to be found among the data files. 'These situations are so fluid that all the news we had when we left Coronus will be completely out of date by now anyway.'

Both officers nodded in agreement, and as so often before I was struck by the contrast between them; Kasteen's red hair and blue eyes stood out vividly against her pale complexion and the muted tones of her uniform, while Broklaw's slate-grey irises almost matched the colours of his clothing, combining with his dark hair and equally pale features² to make him appear to merge with the shadows surrounding him.

We were standing in the quietest corner we could find of what was in the process of becoming our command centre, leaning on the railing of a metal gantry overlooking the wide rockcrete floor. Below us troopers lugged boxes and equipment around, arguing heatedly with one other over where they were supposed to go, and our engineers connected cables with what seemed to me to be an almost wilful disregard of potential trip hazards or accidental electrocution. (Since most of them were at least as much metal as flesh, I don't suppose the odd jolt of electricity would have bothered them too much in any case. Some of them even seemed to like it.)

In other words our deployment was proceeding as efficiently as it ever did, and as usual I was content to stand back and let the lower orders get on with the grunt work while I considered the wider issues, like how to ensure that my own stay on this peculiar world remained as comfortable as possible. In this I had the inestimable assistance of Jorgen, my aide, whose degree of indispensability was matched only by the power of his body odour. Secure in the knowledge that even now he was sequestering the most desirable quarters for my own use, and was setting up my office in a suitably inaccessible location, so that I need only be bothered with the most pressing of duties, I returned my attention to the conversation.

'Why do the peasants ever revolt?' Broklaw asked rhetorically. It can hardly be denied that uprisings occur right across the Imperium with monotonous regularity, only to be put down with commendable vigour by the appropriate authorities, to the extent that in themselves they're hardly a remarkable event. In general they tend to be spontaneous and barely organised, sparked by a particular grievance or sense of injustice, and easily contained by the local law enforcement agencies or Planetary Defence Forces. But the insurrection on Periremunda was different.

For one thing, it was rare for a co-ordinated campaign of violence to break out across the entire surface of a planet almost simultaneously, without any of the usual warning signs like riots, protests, or the burning of the Governor in effigy³ cropping up beforehand. It was even more rare where

the planet in question was, for the most part, quietly prosperous, with an unimaginative and Emperor-fearing population, and a Governor who actually appeared to care about the welfare of his citizens. And for almost a dozen Imperial Guard regiments to be deployed in response was almost unprecedented. That implied that someone high up in the subsector command staff thought the PDF couldn't be relied on to contain the situation if it continued to deteriorate, which implied in turn that their loyalty was suspect. And that, you may be sure, was enough to set the palms of my hands itching in the uncomfortable fashion that they tended to do when my subconscious was joining dots and coming up with a picture that my forebrain really wouldn't like at all if it had been able to bring it into focus.

'There's bound to be a briefing,' Kasteen said, following the swearing, sweating troopers lugging her desk into the office that she'd earmarked for her personal use almost as soon as we'd taken possession of the jumble of warehouses that had been allocated to us as a staging area and makeshift garrison, on the periphery of the star port landing field. On the one hand that suited me very nicely; I always like to feel I'm close to a line of retreat if things turn out badly, and a pad full of orbit-capable shuttles within easy running distance is about as good as it gets. On the other, though, it meant we were nicely situated for rapid deployment by drop-ship to anywhere trouble might flare up, and if my itching palms were anything to go by, it wasn't likely to take too long to materialise.

Another gaggle of troopers scurried in and out of Kasteen's cubbyhole with chairs to go along with the desk, and we all sat, looking out over the floor of the warehouse again. She'd chosen well, I thought, one of a line of glass-fronted cubicles on a mezzanine gallery roughly halfway up the wall facing the big doors fronting the loading docks. From here she'd have a commanding view of everything going on in the main body of the building.

And outside it, too, at the moment; the doors were open, admitting a steady stream of laden troopers, lugging boxes from the backs of the trucks backed up to the loading bays, and a flurry of snowflakes from the open expanse of rockcrete outside where our Chimeras were snarling their way through a thin film of freezing slush. By Valhallan standards, of course, it was warm enough, most of the men and women I could see still in their shirtsleeves, some of which were even rolled up. It was chilly for me, though, and I was as grateful as ever for my commissarial greatcoat, into

which I huddled, trying to ignore the draught punching its way in through the open door. Abruptly the chill breeze became imbued with the odour of month-old socks left to marinade in compost, and my aide appeared in the gap.

‘Tanna, sir?’ he asked, depositing a tray on the newly installed slab of wood between us.

‘Thank you, Jurgen,’ I said, accepting the fragrant beverage gratefully, while he handed tea bowls to Kasteen and Broklaw, who held their breath almost by reflex as he moved closer. They sipped their drinks thoughtfully, and I tried to restrain the impulse to gulp mine, feeling the warmth spreading gradually through my body as I swallowed. Jurgen refilled my bowl.

‘You’re welcome sir.’ He handed me a message slate. ‘This came in for you a few minutes ago.’ I took and scanned it, and glanced up at the two officers.

‘Well,’ I said, trying to restrain my sudden flare of enthusiasm at the prospect of being able to skive off to somewhere a bit warmer for a while. ‘This might give us a few answers, I suppose.’

‘Who’s it from?’ Kasteen asked, her surprise showing in her voice. We’d only been dirtside for a few hours, hardly long enough for anyone on Periremunda to be aware of our presence yet, let alone send us messages.

‘The local arbitrator,’⁴ I said. I skimmed the slate across the desk, so she could read it. ‘He wants to discuss jurisdictional protocols, in case our boys and girls get a little over-exuberant in their off-time.’ This was a common enough request when a Guard regiment or two pitched up on a planet somewhere, so that when the troopers started getting into mischief (which they invariably did, or my job would have been pretty pointless) everyone involved knew whether they should be handed over to the local courts, the military provosts, or directly to the Commissariat.

Of course you’d probably get as many different answers to that as there were commissars on the planet, but in my case I always asked for any of our troopers who got into trouble to be remanded directly into my custody, a habit I’d got into right at the beginning of my career with the 12th Field Artillery, and seen no reason to break in the years since. For one thing it fostered the impression among the troopers that I cared about their welfare, and would always go out of my way to take care of one of our own, which was good for morale generally, and for another it gave me a good excuse to

leave the regiment in search of more congenial activities on a fairly regular basis. On the occasions I couldn't be bothered, or was genuinely too busy, I could always rely on Jurgen to take care of the paperwork. I shrugged. 'I suppose I could just call him back, but...'

'You're thinking of going in person?' Kasteen asked.

I nodded. 'I'm sure he'd appreciate the courtesy, and it never hurts to make a good impression.' Not to mention the fact that the planetary capital was a good couple of thousand metres lower, and a damn sight warmer, than Hoarfell, where we were currently stationed.

Broklaw looked concerned. 'Get some rest first, at least,' he counselled. 'You've been on your feet since we made orbit.'

'No longer than anyone else,' I said, contriving to look as if I was stifling a yawn. In truth I wasn't all that tired, having managed to catch a short nap on the shuttle trip down, which had not only refreshed me a little but had conferred the added bonus of avoiding Jurgen's inevitable discomfiture at being airborne in an atmosphere. I'd never known him to actually be sick, such a thing being beneath the dignity he fondly imagined was conferred on him by his exalted position as a commissar's personal aide, but his anxiety about the possibility tended to combine with the physical nausea to make him sweat like an ork, which in turn would ripen his habitual bouquet to quite an astonishing degree. I shrugged. 'Besides, it's too good a chance to miss. If anyone can tell us what's really going on here, it's the local arbitrator.'

'Good point,' Kasteen said. 'If you think you're up to it.' She looked at me narrowly. 'Anything you can get out of him is bound to be more reliable than the pap we get through the usual channels.'

'My thought exactly,' I said, 'and the more we know about what we're facing here, the better we'll be able to deal with it.' Words that were to have something of a hollow ring, in retrospect, but at that point I had no idea just how little anyone really knew about the true state of affairs on Periremunda, apart from a handful of people who knew altogether too much for comfort.



Editorial Note:

Although Cain is reasonably explicit about the topographical peculiarities of Periremunda, he only bothers to be so when they impinge in some manner on his own experience; something which is, of course, entirely consistent with his attitude throughout the archive. I have therefore interpolated the following extract, which I hope will make much of what follows a little more readily comprehensible.

From *Interesting Places and Tedious People: A Wanderer's Waybook* by Jerval Sekara, 145 M39

Like many worlds with unusual characteristics, the early history of Periremunda is shrouded in conjecture and legend. One can be reasonably certain that it was originally discovered some time around the middle of M24 by the explorer Acer Alba, only to be promptly forgotten again due to his untimely demise, probably in an affair of honour over the affections of a courtesan. Following the rediscovery of Alba's notes by Magos Provocare, a tireless challenger of the unknown whose unorthodox views frequently attracted the opprobrium of his peers, the planet was eventually colonised in the early years of the 27th millennium.

What makes it worthy of the discriminating wayfarer's attention, at least for a short while, is the fact that by any reasonable definition of the phrase the world as a whole is uninhabitable. The equatorial regions are not so much hot as literally molten, the rock itself bubbling from below the ground in a constantly shifting sea of liquid magma, while the rest of the surface is a desiccated desert in which nothing seems able to live. There are, however,

scattered pockets of habitability, no less comfortable than other, more Emperor-favoured worlds. Vast plateaux, too many to count, soar upwards from this arid foundation to heights sufficient to take them into the cooler air where life itself is possible, and hundreds of the larger ones, which can stretch for tens of kilometres across, boast cities, farms, and manufactoria equal to those of the fairer globes most of us are pleased to call home.

Climate and temperature are more a matter of altitude than geography here, enabling the jaded traveller to experience a wide variety of environments with little more effort than that required to hire an aircar and chauffeur, although, as is so often the case with backwater planets, some caution is advised when attempting to find accommodation, as even the most prestigious local establishments can, on closer inspection, turn out to be somewhat basic in the facilities they offer.

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TWO

In the event, the arbitrator was suitably flattered by my request to discuss our business in person, not least, it seemed, because my reputation had preceded me as it so often does, and scarcely another hour had passed before I found the ground dropping away beneath me once again. Jurgen had managed to secure us seats on a courier shuttle with urgent business in Principia Mons⁵, his manifest pride in being able to find us transport so quickly only partially mitigated by the realisation that having done so meant having to get airborne again for the second time in one day. Nevertheless he bore this travail with the phlegmatic stoicism with which he accepted everything else, only the thickening of the air around him and the whitening of his knuckles mute testament to the discomfort he felt even before we'd left the pad. (Although, being Jurgen, I suppose it would be a little more accurate to say that his knuckles went a paler shade of grime.) It would probably have suited both of us better if I'd left him behind, but protocol demanded that my aide accompany me on an official visit to an Imperial official of such exalted rank, so we'd both have to make the best of it, Jurgen trying to ignore the discomfort of his rebellious stomach, and me trying not to picture the reaction of the arbitrator when I turned up with him in tow.

Perhaps it was for that reason that I turned my attention to the landscape falling away beneath us, getting my first real glimpse of the planet that we'd come so far to protect. I knew intellectually that we were perched on the highest and most desolate plateau of this patchwork world, but seeing the reality from the air brought the strangeness of our position home to me in a manner that no amount of background briefing would ever have been able to do. Hoarfell was huge, so many kloms⁶ across that disembarking

from the drop-ship had felt like stepping out onto any other planet in the Imperium. Now, as our shuttle banked away to the south-east, I found myself able to appreciate the sheer scale of it for the first time.

The first thing to attract my attention was the field at which we'd landed, and which, like most of the other dirtside facilities scattered across the face of the planet, combined the functions of a star port with those of an aerodrome for the local traffic. This was, of course, considerable, given the peculiar topography of the place. With very few exceptions, where adjacent inhabited plateaux were both close enough and sufficiently similar in height to allow the construction of viaducts between them, taking to the skies was the only way to shift anything from one tiny island of life to another. As a result the amount of air traffic criss-crossing the globe was truly staggering, given its relatively modest population of a mere billion or so. Even on the short trip to Principia Mons, which took less than an hour, I caught sight of innumerable other aircraft, ranging from two-seater skycars to wallowing cargo dirigibles the size of warehouses, around which swarms of smaller planes buzzed like insects.

As we rose above the city of Darien, the densest concentration of citizens on Hoarfell, I found myself being put in mind of the firewasp nest I'd stumbled across on Calcifrie (which had turned out to be remarkably useful in deterring the party of eldar reavers pursuing me at the time, but I digress), a never-ending swarm of bright metal insects swirling about the landing pads as they receded into the distance. Though the densest concentration of aircraft was hovering above the aerodrome there were plenty of others buzzing around the rest of the city, private skimmers and aircars for the most part. I made a mental note to suggest to Kasteen that we get our Hydras deployed as soon as possible; rather too many pilots were crossing the space above our garrison for my liking. In the event, of course, she was well ahead of me, and by the time I returned she'd already imposed an exclusion zone in a wide enough radius around us to seriously irritate the local traffic controllers.⁷

As we rose higher, away from the city itself, I was able to get a better view of the landscape surrounding it, a wilderness of snow and ice through which hills and escarpments in muted tones of black and grey rose to pierce the leaden clouds above them, so that it was hard to tell where rock ended and vapour began. Somewhere out there was the highest point on the planet, but which of the vague blobs in the distance it was I couldn't tell even if I'd

cared.

Then, suddenly, with shocking abruptness, the landscape vanished. I just had time for the briefest of glimpses of a sheer cliff face of quite staggering proportions receding into the depths beneath us, which were swallowed by the all-enveloping murk, before we were cocooned in a bubble of mist that wrapped itself around our fragile little craft and blotted out the world.

Happily, our first sight of Principia Mons was far more propitious. As we descended the clouds grew thinner, merely whitening at first, until finally they broke altogether, allowing shafts of bright sunlight to break through, and revealing a sky of quite remarkably vivid blue. (Or so it seemed to me, but then I'd been stuck onboard a succession of starships for most of the last few months.) Jurgen seemed no more uncomfortable than usual, so I left him to his own devices, and glanced out of the window again, eager to see what the absence of clouds would reveal.

It's no exaggeration to say that I've seen some remarkable sights in my time, from the spires of Holy Terra itself to the aurorae of Fabulon, but the landscape of Periremunda was in a class of its own. Beneath us the last vestiges of rain evanesced into vapour, rising again to form more clouds without ever reaching the sere and barren surface of the world below, where bare, baking rock alternated with oceans of drifting sand.

Once we flew over a sandstorm, which would have stripped the flesh from the bones of an unprotected man within seconds, kilometres high, but still so far below us as to seem like a thin film of dust seeping across the planet's surface. The eye-stabbing flicker of electrical discharges sparked and flashed deep within it, an uncanny echo of the rolling sonic boom that trailed in the wake of our hurtling aircraft. And in all directions, as far as the eye could see, rose columns of rock, each separated from its nearest neighbour by tens or hundreds of kilometres, to stand proud and alone, like the trunks of some immense petrified forest.

From above they seemed refulgent, glowing with life, in stark contrast to the magnificent desolation surrounding them. As we passed close to a few I was able to discern forests and lakes, hills and valleys, and the unmistakable signs of human habitation, all preserved in miniature, like the vivaria sometimes maintained by curious children or noble dilettantes.

We must have crossed or skirted some dozen or so of these remarkable spires on our journey, although most flashed past so quickly I barely had

time to take in any details. Some were relatively open, appearing to support agricultural communities of some kind, while others seemed completely overgrown, choked by a profusion of tangled vegetation that only a Catachan could love. A few seemed to support communities the size of small towns, while others, barely a kilometre across, seemed completely uninhabited.

I dredged up from somewhere the statistic that roughly eighteen thousand of the plateaux scattered across the planet held a population of some sort or another,⁸ and shuddered at the logistical problems that implied for the Imperial Guard forces waiting to be deployed in their defence. Even split down into individual squads, which would be absurd, a mere dozen regiments could never hope to cover a fraction of them. All we could do was wait, and hope our enemies showed their faces openly somewhere we could concentrate our forces against them. A pretty forlorn hope, of course, if they knew what they were doing, and what little indication we'd had so far seemed to confirm that they did. If ever a planet seemed ideally suited for guerrilla warfare, Periremunda was it.

Perhaps fortunately I had little time for any more such pessimistic musings, as Jurgen finally roused himself with an expression of hopeful inquiry.

'Do you think that's it, sir?' he asked.

I nodded. 'Must be,' I said. There could only be a few truly urban areas on a world like this, and I doubted that any of the others would be quite as dense as this one. A faint tremor passed through the airframe of our tiny craft as, once again, we became slower than the sound of our passage, and the pitch of the engines fell, allowing us the leisure to contemplate the city as we drifted in towards the landing field.

Principia Mons was, in many ways, gratifyingly familiar, the surface of the plateau covered in the sprawling jumble of hab units, manufactoria, temples and other such structures that can generally be seen on the approaches to any reasonably populous city throughout the Imperium. A few open areas remained unbuilt on, chiefly bordering the precipitous drop edging this peculiar eyrie. There were a handful of parks scattered across the outer fringes of the city, and a further one almost in the centre, which seemed to have a fortified enclave of some kind in the middle of it⁹, but for the most part the place seemed completely urbanised.

As we approached I could see that the top kilometre or so of the spire had

been honeycombed with tunnels, leaving structures and industrial units clinging to the side of the rock. The effect was not entirely unreminiscent of a hive, and I felt a faint warm glow of nostalgia at the thought.¹⁰ It didn't last long, though, being swiftly replaced by the realisation that despite its elevated position the planetary capital possessed an undercity to rival that of a more conventional community. In my experience troublemakers tended to gravitate into them like sump rats down a waste pipe, where they were Horus's own job to winkle out again.

Not my problem, though, I told myself firmly, having had more than enough of that sort of thing on Gravalax and Simia Orichalcae. In any case my place was with the 597th on Hoarfell, which, cold and uninviting as it was, at least had the advantage of being comfortably free of tunnels where heretics might go to ground. I had no more time for such musings, however, as a sudden surge of pressure against my spine told me that the landing thrusters had just cut in, and within moments, it seemed, we were back on terra firma, to Jurgen's eloquently unspoken relief.

We disembarked into a fresh breeze, lightly scented with the odours of burnt promethium and cooling metal, but welcome for all that, and I squinted reflexively. The sun was still some way above the horizon, and although the first blush of sunset was beginning to tint the clouds above us, it still seemed dazzling after the cheerless gloom of the snow clouds blanketing Darien. It felt pleasantly warm, too, and I unfastened my coat, stepping upwind of Jurgen as I did so. I'd served with him long enough to realise that the sudden increase in temperature would soon have a similar effect on his body odour. I glanced around, orientating myself.

'We seem to have been expected,' I remarked. A groundcar was making its way across the expanse of rockcrete between us and the terminal building, flanked by a pair of outriders perched over the wheels of their gently-humming monocycles, pennants on its front wings bearing the device of the Adeptus Arbites snapping in the wind. My aide nodded, sidestepping a servitor, which seemed so intent on recovering the packages from the courier plane's hold that it didn't even register our presence.

'They're doing the thing in style,' he agreed, a hint of approval entering his voice. If there was one thing Jurgen relished, apart from porno slates, it was a punctilious adherence to protocol, preferably with as much pomp and ceremony as possible. A Salamander or utility truck would have done just as well for me, to be honest, even more so if I'd known what that simple

little piece of courtesy was going to lead to, but I have to admit to feeling rather gratified at the time. I didn't travel by limousine all that often, and the effusiveness of the welcome being extended to me augured well for the meeting when we arrived.

The groundcar hissed to a halt at the foot of the boarding ramp, and a young man in a neatly tailored uniform hopped out to meet us, with a crisp salute to me, and a sidelong look of barely-suppressed astonishment at Jurgen.

'Commissar Cain?' he asked, as though there could be any possible doubt of the fact, and I nodded, returning the salute in my best parade-ground manner.

'That's right.' I indicated my malodorous companion. 'This is my personal aide, Gunner¹¹ Feric Jurgen.'

'Justicar¹² Billem Nyte.' The young man nodded at Jurgen with as much courtesy as he could muster, no doubt noting the contrast between his own immaculate uniform and the rather haphazard manner in which my aide's seemed to be not so much clothing his body as just hanging about in its general vicinity. 'Arbitrator Keesh sent me to pick you up.'

'That was very thoughtful,' I said, nodding a greeting to the outriders as I settled into a seat so over-upholstered that for a moment I thought I'd need my chainsword to cut my way out of it again. Neither of our escorts seemed to notice me, although the blank reflective visors of their helmets made it difficult to be sure. I fought down a fleeting memory of the necron warriors we'd faced so recently, and opened the window as Jurgen squeezed in beside me, unslinging his lasgun in order to fit it through the door. (Like most troopers in the Guard, he would rather have cut his own arm off than go anywhere without it, an attitude I'd been more than grateful for on innumerable occasions.) 'I must say this is a great deal more comfortable than I was expecting.'

A small nalwood cabinet, which alone was probably worth more than the aircraft we'd arrived on, proved to contain six crystal goblets and a couple of decanters. Finding that one of them contained amasec of a quite exceptional age and piquancy I poured myself a generous measure and settled back to enjoy the ride.

'It's the arbitrator's personal vehicle,' Nyte told us with a hint of pride, no doubt revelling in his status as one of the few justicars allowed to play with it. 'I'm his amanuensis.'

‘Then I’ll be sure to thank him when I see him,’ I said, noticing Jurgen’s expression out of the corner of my eye, and moving quickly to forestall the inevitable jockeying for precedence that was bound to ensue between the two aides now that he’d realised Nyte was more than just a chauffeur. Nyte took the hint and returned to the driving seat, no doubt grateful for the sheet of armourcrys between him and the passenger compartment.

At first sight, Principia Mons seemed little different from any other Imperial city I’d visited in the last few years, apart from the visible lack of artillery damage. We hummed along a broad avenue between pleasingly proportioned buildings, the lack of space at the top of the plateau we were perched on not apparently having had an appreciable effect on the local architecture. I’d been expecting a rather more jammed-together feel, but in general it all felt surprisingly open and uncluttered. After a while it occurred to me that this apparent contradiction explained the extensive undercity I’d noticed as we flew in: the Periremundans had simply built downwards instead of up. (Not something I’d have felt too happy about in their position, weakening the top of the pole I was perched on, but I supposed they knew what they were doing.)

All in all, then, it was a remarkably pleasant ride; at least until we got to the point where someone tried to kill us.



THREE

As ambushes go, I have to admit it was neatly and professionally executed. I suppose I should have expected something of the sort, having been warned before we left Coronus that the insurgents we faced appeared to be well organised and effective out of all proportion to their numbers, but the taste of unaccustomed luxury and the sheer normality of the street scene gliding past the window had lulled me into a false sense of security completely at odds with my normally reliable streak of paranoia.

Our outrider escort was clearing the way for us with flashing lights and wailing sirens, the constant flow of civilian traffic that would otherwise have impeded our progress scurrying out of the way with gratifying alacrity, so I wasn't too surprised to notice a larger, heavier monocycle trailing along in our wake, taking advantage of the clear channel we were opening up to make much better speed than its rider could normally hope to manage along the crowded urban roads. I couldn't see much of his face, his head being protected by a helmet not dissimilar to those of our escorts apart from the vivid flame motif that flickered across it, echoing the red and yellow paintwork of his cycle and the crimson leathers both he and his passenger were wearing. The girl riding pillion with him was bareheaded though, apart from a pair of goggles, her auburn hair whipping back like a banner in the breeze of their passing, and I fought down the impulse to wave as they drew closer.

'What the hell...' Nyte said, his voice echoing in my comm-bead even as he jammed on the brakes with a suddenness that wrenched me from the embrace of the clinging upholstery and almost spilled my drink. There was a large transporter ahead of us, slewed across the carriageway, its cab section wedged against the supporting piers of an overhanging bridge.

Evidently its driver had misjudged the distance in trying to pull over to let us pass, got stuck, and left the cargo trailer hanging out over the roadway, obstructing it. 'Get that thing out of the way!'

'I'm on it,' one of the outriders assured him, evidently on the same frequency, and accelerated away. A moment later he slewed to a halt next to the cab, and began a heated altercation with the driver.

'Something's not right,' I said, feeling the familiar warning tingle in the palms of my hands. The driver should have been getting out by now, assessing the damage at least, and deferring to the authority of the justicar haranguing him. Trusting my instincts implicitly after all we'd been through together, Jurgen picked up the lasgun, which he'd left lying across his lap, and flicked the safety off.

'What do you mean, sir?' Nyte asked, an instant before the monocycle following us roared up alongside, and I found myself looking down the barrel of an automatic shotgun. The girl holding it smiled at me, the wide mouth in her angular face somehow seeming to hold too many teeth, and squeezed the trigger. A loud crack echoed around the luxurious cabin, and for a moment I wondered why I wasn't dead, before the distinctive smell of ionised air told me that Jurgen had managed to get his shot in first. The girl pitched backwards off the monocycle's pillion, and a heavy armour-piercing slug, evidently intended to shatter the armourcrys window they'd no doubt expected to be there (and which would have been, I suppose, had I been accompanied by anyone other than Jurgen), tore through the reinforced body shell centimetres from my shoulder instead.

'What the hell was that?' Nyte demanded, seeming rather slow on the uptake for an agent of Imperial justice, but then I suppose he was keeping his eye on the road.

'Ambush!' I said tersely, drawing my laspistol, but I never got the chance to use it on the rider beside us. Nyte reacted immediately, swinging the heavy vehicle, and ramming him off the road. Our would-be assassin hit the guardrail, performed an elegant parabola, and bounced off the support pier of the bridge ahead, which was still blocked by the frakking truck, of course.

'I can't get around it,' Nyte said, drifting into a skid that bounced us off another couple of groundcars and left us coasting to a halt facing the wrong way and an apparently endless stream of gridlocked traffic, which began filling every square metre of rockcrete in sight like water pouring into a

bucket. A light cargo hauler belonging, according to the garish sign on its side, to a firm of sanitation engineers, slammed into the side of us, becoming inextricably wedged against the doors.

‘This side’s jammed too,’ Jurgen offered helpfully, then fired another las-bolt at a civilian in a jacket patterned with a bile green and orange check, whose purple-dyed hair stood out around his head as though he’d just stuck a finger in a power socket. The jacket alone was offensive enough to justify his summary execution, although what had attracted Jurgen’s attention was the rather more pragmatic matter of the shotgun he carried, the same type as the one the trick cyclists had tried to use on us a moment before, and no doubt would have done, if my perfectly understandable desire for fresh air hadn’t allowed us to fire first.

‘We’re trapped!’ Nyte said, sounding more angry than frightened, which I suppose would have been reassuring if I hadn’t been panicking enough for the three of us. Vile Jacket dived for cover behind a car full of squawking civilians, who piled out and ran, and I glanced around hoping to catch sight of the confederates I knew must be around here somewhere. Fat chance of that, though, with my vision blocked in almost every direction.

‘No we’re not,’ I said, thumbing my chainsword to maximum speed, and thrusting it over my head as I did so. The passenger compartment filled with sparks and the smell of burning, but I was managing to cut through the reinforced metal, and after a moment I’d succeeded in removing a wide enough section of coachwork to worm my way out and up onto the roof.

I wasn’t out there for long, though, you can be sure, as presenting an obvious target has never been very high on my list of desirable things to do. As I slithered down into whatever cover I could find, I tried hard to recall what I’d seen.

The shotgunner with the bad taste in jackets was in a good position to make life unpleasant for us the moment we raised our heads, for he was able to get a clear line of sight. I knew shotguns could be loaded with all kinds of surprises, and doubted that our antagonists, whoever they were, would confine themselves to anything as obvious as scattershot and slugs. The sheer number of milling civilians in the immediate vicinity made it almost impossible to guess just how many more of them were closing in on our position, but there was little doubt about where they were coming from. As I’d ducked back behind the reassuring bulk of the armoured limousine I’d seen the driver of the truck, which had blocked the road, leaping from

the cab at last, a pistol of some kind in his hand.

‘Seven hostiles closing on Rolling Justice,’¹³ the outrider who’d been dispatched to deal with the obstruction in the first place reported. Then a crackle of gunfire erupted from that general direction. ‘Correction, six moving, one down.’

‘Rolin, Dawze, get back here!’ Nyte ordered, his voice taking on the peculiar flat timbre of someone consciously working at staying in control, despite a jolt of adrenaline big enough to have woken a hibernating keth. ‘All units in the vicinity, converge on these co-ordinates.’

‘I’m still pinned,’ the outrider responded, a crackle of small arms fire lending credence to his words. A second voice chimed in on the same channel, presumably the other one, wherever the hell he’d got to.

‘I can see him, Dawze. He’s behind that red speeder, your two o’clock. I can circle and take him.’

‘Negative,’ Nyte snapped. ‘Get back here and guard the commissar.’ Encouraging words, I’m sure you’ll agree, but I’d got a good enough idea of the layout of things to realise just how much more easily said than done that was going to be. Rolin would have had a better chance of stopping an avalanche with a teaspoon than making any headway through the mess surrounding us, and that went for the reinforcements Nyte was calling in as well. If I was going to get out of this in one piece, I’d have to take care of matters myself, as usual.

Well, almost. A familiar odour behind me brought the welcome news that I’d been joined by the only assistance I knew I could rely on.

‘The justicar’s got one,’ Jurgen confirmed, slithering into the gap between the rear bumper of our car and a motorised tricycle with a large metal box between its two front wheels. Judging by the aroma of soylens viridiens emanating from it, and the attire of its startled rider, who goggled at us as though she’d suddenly been confronted by a pair of orks, the contraption was full of comestibles of some kind intended to be sold in the street. He raised his lasgun again, and spat a burst in the general direction of the shotgunner. ‘Frak. Missed the gretch-frotter.’ He glanced at the quietly bleating street vendor, and flushed. ‘Sorry miss. Didn’t realise there were ladies present.’

The sheer incongruity of his attempt at good manners seemed to reassure the girl that she wasn’t hallucinating, at any rate, and she swallowed convulsively. ‘Don’t mind me,’ she said, her voice quivering rather less

than I would have expected. Apparently reassured as much as seemed feasible under the circumstances, she coughed nervously. 'Who are you people, anyway? And what in the warp's going on?'

'Ciaphas Cain, regimental Commissar, 597th Valhallan. My aide Jurgen. Terrorist attack,' I said, covering the basics as quickly as I could, and returning my attention to the important stuff. Dawze had at least disabled one, and was still engaged in a firefight with another. That left five hostiles potentially closing on our position. One of them we knew about, and he wasn't going anywhere, which left four unaccounted for. The palms of my hands began to tingle.

'Where are the other hostiles?' I voxed, hoping Rolin or Dawze might have a clue. No such luck.

'Lost them in the crowd,' Rolin said helpfully.

'Oh for frak's sake!' I said. 'Use your eyes! Everyone else will be running away!' A stubber round suddenly punched its way through the box on the trike, and its owner squealed, diving behind my legs like a startled puppy. I looked up in time to see a young man in the robes of a low-level Administratum functionary standing on the roof of the sanitation truck, adjusting his aim. Before he could complete the motion I swung my chainsword up, taking his left leg off at the knee, and he toppled to the rockcrete in front of us, where I was able to detach his head with a simple swipe. The snack-seller squealed again, the green streaks in her hair now augmented by a spatter of less flattering scarlet.

'One more down,' I reported. 'Nyte, where the hell are you?'

'On my way,' the justicar responded, appearing on the roof of the limousine at last, the heavy stubber in his hands accounting for the length of his absence; no doubt he'd been scrabbling in some carefully concealed weapons locker. He swung it, shredding the nose of the car behind which the shotgunner was sheltering with a hailstorm of high-calibre ordnance. Vile Jacket rolled out of the way, bringing up his own weapon, but before he could fire Jurgen took him in the torso with a short, controlled burst, and he twitched for a moment before lying still. Nyte turned to look at me, and flourished the stubber.

'Scratch three,' he said, a trace of smugness in his voice. Then before I could even say something helpful, like 'get the frak down, you idiot,' another shotgun blast took him full in the chest, and he fell heavily to the ground on the far side of the car. His torso armour seemed to have taken the

brunt of it, but there was a lot of blood too. After a moment he hauled himself sufficiently close to vertical to slump against the bodywork, still sitting on the carriageway, but he wasn't going to be putting up much of a fight from now on if I was any judge.

'Man down,' Jurgen said, as though it might have escaped my notice, but I suppose he could have meant it for our listening escorts.

'Engaging,' Rolin said, a moment before a crackle of small arms fire made that obvious. 'Two hostiles, female, look like they're carrying autoguns.' There was a moment's pause. 'One breaking for your position...' then his vox-channel abruptly went dead.

'Rolin's down,' Dawze confirmed a moment later, 'and the hostile I've been engaging is pulling back.' A note of puzzlement entered his voice. 'Why would he do that? He had me pinned.'

'I don't know,' I said, the palms of my hands tingling in earnest now, 'but they seem remarkably well co-ordinated.' I looked at the rapidly cooling bodies of the terrorists we'd dispatched. None of them had any kind of comms gear with them that I could see. 'Can you spot anyone who seems to be in control?'

'Negative,' Dawze replied. A note of puzzlement entered his voice. 'Come to that, I haven't seen any of them so much as speak.' A horrible suspicion began to stir in the depths of my mind. I had no time to worry about that just at the moment, though, as a fusillade of incoming fire began rattling off the metal all around us.

'Emperor preserve us, we're going to die!' the snack vendor moaned, huddling so close to the rockcrete she might have been trying to disguise herself as one of the road markings. Likely as that sounded, it was hardly helpful, so while Jurgen returned the favour with a couple of unaimed bursts in the general direction most of the projectiles seemed to have come from, I looked her in the eye with my most commissarial expression of reassurance.

'We're not dead yet,' I said, with all the self-confidence I could muster, 'and we're not going to be. I swore an oath to protect the Imperium from the Emperor's enemies when I put this uniform on, and today, you're that part of the Imperium. All right...' I trailed off, suddenly remembering I had no idea what the girl's name was. She nodded, clearly divining my difficulty.

'Zemelda Cleat.' She took a deep breath, and straightened, picking up the

stubber the young man had dropped when I trisected him. 'And I can take care of myself, thank you very much.'

'Good girl,' I said, reflecting that at least she might draw their fire, even if the chances of her hitting anything with the clumsy weapon were minimal. 'Tuck that into your shoulder, pull the trigger gently, and Emperor guide your aim.' She followed my instructions somewhat gingerly, wincing at the noise and the recoil, and then a feral grin stretched across her face.

'Brisk!' she said approvingly, and spat a steady stream of shot at our enemies, who, now I came to think of it, seemed remarkably reluctant to take advantage of their still superior firepower.

'Why aren't they advancing?' Jurgen asked, not really expecting an answer. 'They've got us completely boxed in.'

'Maybe they're waiting for us to panic,' I said, trying to sound as though that was a remote possibility rather than the current state of affairs, at least so far as I was concerned. 'Break cover and try to run for it.' That would have been suicidal, of course, but it happens more often than you'd credit. The fight or flight reflex is deeply ingrained in the human psyche, and tends to surface at the most inconvenient moments, which is why our Guard troopers are so well trained to override it, and they have people like me looking over their shoulders in case that turns out not to be enough.

'We'd have to be pretty stupid,' Jurgen pointed out unnecessarily. 'We can hold them off all day from here.' It was perfectly true, we were in an easily defensible position, even if that was more by luck than judgement; even more so now that the last of the innocent bystanders (apart from Zemelda) were rapidly-diminishing dots on the horizon, and anyone not wearing a justicar's uniform was an obvious target. My aide shrugged, developing his theme in rather more detail than I would have appreciated. 'Unless they've got grenades or a flamer, of course.'

'Of course,' I echoed, a thrill of horror running through me at the thought. Suddenly their tactics made a lot more sense: keep our heads down while someone edged close enough to lob a couple of fraggers over the barricade of metal protecting us. Unless some of the shotguns they seemed to favour were loaded with inferno rounds, in which case they wouldn't even need to get that close, just line us up in their sights and start the barbeque. I voxed Dawze. 'Any of them carrying grenades that you can see?'

'No.' His voice changed, taking on a tinge of curiosity. 'I can see movement in the truck again. Two, maybe three more of them. I'm circling

round for a better look.'

'Be careful,' I said, the little warning voice in the back of my head positively screaming. I cracked off a couple of shots from my laspistol at a flicker of movement behind a blocky blue utility truck some four or five vehicles away, and was rewarded with a sudden scurry of motion as whoever it was ducked back into cover. A desultory stubber round or two, and a hail of scattershot, rattled against our refuge, then everything went quiet again.

'Definitely three of them, keeping under cover,' Dawze reported after a moment. 'Moving fast. Emperor's teeth, they're quick. Moving to intercept.'

'Stay back!' I warned, the suspicion I still didn't want to acknowledge rising again, leaving a tingle of fear in the pit of my stomach. I shook it off irritably. Things were bad enough already, without jumping at phantoms.

'It's OK,' Dawze reassured me. 'They don't know I'm here. I can drop the first one before they even...' His voice rose to a scream. 'Emperor on Earth, what the hell is th—'

His vox went dead.

'Here they come,' Jurgen said, as calmly as he reported everything from my bath being ready to the sudden appearance of a slaving daemon horde, and opened up with his lasgun. A moment later he ducked back beside me, bringing a powerful blast of his personal fragrance with him, and grimaced. 'They seem pretty determined.'

'No kidding.' Zemelda crouched down on my other side, her face white. A hail of incoming fire blistered the air over our heads, and I could only hope that Nyte had had enough sense to keep his head down as well.

'They're not trying to kill us,' I said, taking no comfort from the idea. 'This is just to keep us from shooting back.'

'Well, it's working.' Her jaw clenched grimly. 'Why?'

'So they can close. They must know help's on the way, so they need to finish it fast.'

Jurgen nodded. 'Suppressive fire, we call it. When it stops, they'll make their move.' We looked at one another with grim understanding.

'So the moment they do, we fire,' I explained, keeping it as simple as I could for the civilian. 'Shoot everything and anything that looks like a threat. Got it?'

'Got it.' Zemelda looked as green as her hair, but nodded anyway.

‘Good.’ Abruptly the noise stopped, and we rose together, looking for targets. Jurgen found one immediately, two women both carrying autoguns, charging towards us with the berserker fury of orks. One was dressed as a medicae orderly, the other enveloped in a sea-green smock that blurred the outline of her body, but not enough to hide the subtle wrongness of its shape, a subtlety which all but vanished as I noticed the third hand emerging from its depths to replace the depleted magazine.

‘Genestealer hybrids,’ Jurgen said, recognising them instantly after our run-in with their brethren on Gravalax, opening up on full auto and catching them both in a blizzard of lasbolts. The faux medicae went down, plates of chitin armouring her thorax becoming visible as her robe tore, while the three-armed horror dived for cover again behind an abandoned car. Zemelda began blowing holes through the metal protecting it with her stubber, an expression of stunned horror on her face.

Forewarned by a flicker of movement in the corner of my eye, I turned, just in time to take another assailant, as garishly dressed as the late fellow with the shotgun had been, squarely in the face with a bolt from my laspistol. He screeched and fell back, dropping from the roof of the sanitation truck with a wet, meaty thud, and another figure in a pair of nondescript overalls leapt at me, clawed hands poised to rend and tear. Unfortunately for him, my chainsword had a far longer reach than he did, and he expired in several pieces before he got close enough to use them.

‘What are those things?’ Zemelda asked, still playing bullet tag with the hybrid behind the car, while Jurgen tried to get a clear line of sight on the one disguised as a medicae.

‘Xenos,’ I said, ‘crossed with humans, who didn’t even know they’d been tainted with alien genes. We’ve been finding them hidden on worlds right across the sector.’ I glanced up, and froze. Three purestrain ’stealers were hurtling towards us, bounding across the tangle of stalled metal with all the malignity of hunting dogs catching the scent of something small and furry. I rounded on Jurgen. ‘Forget the hybrids!’ Dangerous as they were, they were barely worth considering compared to the real threat. I’d seen purestrains shredding Terminator armour aboard the *Spawn of Damnation*,¹⁴ and I knew that if they got within arms-length of us we were all dead.

We concentrated our fire against the oncoming creatures, but they were hellish fast and agile, and most of our shots went wild. We managed to down the first one momentarily, but it rose again almost at once, while the

others swept on past it without even breaking stride. Just to make things even worse, we came under fire again from the autogun-armed hybrids, which made us keep our heads down and prevented us from aiming properly. Looking into those slavering jaws, I had no doubt that we would all be dead in moments, and as so often happens in these situations, I found myself preternaturally sensitive to every detail of my surroundings.

Perhaps it was that which first alerted me to the faint trembling in the rockcrete beneath my bootsoles, as though something large and fast was passing below my feet. In any event I distinctly recall feeling that faint tremor of movement, but before I could remark on it to my companions I became aware that something was happening on the road ahead of us. A bright yellow flatbed in the path of the oncoming 'stealers seemed to be shifting and rising up, and for a moment I found myself suspecting warpcraft of some kind. Then as it rose even higher I caught a glimpse of something standing beneath it.

'Emperor be praised!' Zemelda said, with every sign of sincerity, and I have to admit I could scarcely have been more surprised if he'd put in an appearance in person. The lorry was being pushed aside by something roughly human-sized, but completely encased in finely wrought metal, from which the sun struck the unmistakable refulgence of gold. Smaller than the suits worn by one of the Astartes, but power armour nevertheless, and even at this distance it had clearly been crafted by a master artificer whose skill would certainly have impressed Drumon.¹⁵

As we watched, scarcely daring to believe what we were seeing, the gilded warrior tipped the heavy truck over on top of the charging 'stealers, crushing two of them against the other vehicles with a scream of rending metal. After a moment, rancid ichor began to drip through the tangle of wreckage, making it obvious that neither was getting back up again in a hurry.

'Where did he come from?' Jurgen asked, his habitual expression of mild bafflement almost comforting under the circumstances.

'Down there would be my guess,' I said, indicating a manhole cover lying on the carriageway next to a dark hole in the rockcrete. 'He must have come through the undercity.' I had no time for further speculation, as the sole surviving purestrain charged at the golden warrior, and the breath caught in my throat; but the armour-clad figure evaded the creature easily, with a casual grace that looked more suited to the ballroom than the battlefield,

catching one of its wickedly-taloned arms and ripping it clean out of its socket. The 'stealer screeched, and tried to rally, but the foe it was facing seemed as agile as it was. As the chitinous horror tried to charge home once again, the mysterious warrior levelled its right arm, which proved to have a heavy bolter built into it. One short burst was all it took to reduce the hideous creature to a messy stain.

'Well, that was lucky,' I said, trying to sound casual for Zemelda's benefit, but I needn't have bothered. She was still so stunned by this unexpected turn of events that I doubt she'd have noticed if the Emperor Himself had tapped her on the shoulder at that point.

'But who is he?' Jurgen asked. I shrugged.

'I think we're about to find out,' I said. Sure enough our mysterious saviour was walking towards us at an unhurried pace, pausing just long enough to dispatch the remaining hybrids with a couple of casual bolter bursts. They tried to make a fight of it, but it was a futile endeavour really, their bullets just pattering off the gleaming golden armour like summer rain.

I have to admit to a prickle of apprehension as the refulgent figure approached us, allowing me to take in the full splendour of its armour for the first time. It was, as I'd immediately surmised, the work of a master, of that there could be no doubt. The elegance of its construction was all too obvious, at least to anyone who'd spent as much time as I had listening to Drumon rhapsodising over some tech-sorcerous toy or other. It had barely been scratched by the hybrids' bullets, the full intricacy of its decoration undimmed and undamaged.

It was not, as it had first appeared, made entirely of gold, (which given the softness of that particular metal wouldn't have given much protection to its wearer anyway). Rather, the gold was etched onto a polished surface of much darker metal, forming intricate filigree, which in turn twisted around icons of the saints and well-known scenes from the life of Him on Earth. For all its beauty, though, there was no disguising its deadliness, the muzzle of the bolter on its right forearm and the faint crackle of ozone around the power fist on its left mute testament to the destructive power its wearer was able to wield.

The figure halted a couple of metres away, and, to my astonishment, addressed me by name.

'Hello Ciaphas,' it said, through a vox-unit on its chest. The voice sounded familiar, although I couldn't be entirely sure until a golden gauntlet rose to

push back its visor. It opened, with a hiss of breaking atmosphere seals, and a well-remembered face, framed with golden hair, grinned at me, devilment dancing as always in the depthless blue eyes. 'We really must stop meeting like this.'

Clearly enjoying my stupefied expression, which by this point I'm bound to admit would have done credit to Jurgen, Amberley's smile widened still further.

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FOUR

With all due modesty, I have to say that I recovered remarkably fast under the circumstances.¹⁶ I resheathed my weapons, while Jurgen slung his lasgun across his shoulder and went to look for a primary aid kit before Nyte bled to death. Fortunately the limousine seemed well equipped with more than just hidden weaponry, and he was able to begin cutting the straps holding what was left of the justicar's body armour in place free with his combat knife after only a moment or two spent rummaging in the wreckage. Nyte was looking distinctly the worse for wear, and Jurgen cracked a vial of smelling salts under his nose, blissfully unaware of just how pointless that was in his case.

'Last time was more pleasant,' I admitted, having spent the bulk of it chatting about the necron threat in the palatial surroundings of her hotel suite, before the obvious question occurred to me. 'What in the warp are you doing here, anyway?'

Amberley smiled again. 'The same as you, I imagine. Trying to save Periremunda from a 'stealer infestation. Although I was hoping Keesh would have had a chance to explain what's going on before you found out about it for yourself.'

'I'd have preferred that too,' I said feelingly, before the full implication of what she'd said got through to me. 'You mean the Arbites know about this already?'

'Of course they do. Why else do you think they insisted on the Imperial Guard being sent in to contain it? You know the PDF's bound to be compromised.'

I nodded slowly. I'd seen the same thing on Gravalax, and Keffia before that. 'The infestation's well established then?'

Amberley nodded as best she could inside the collection of ironmongery surrounding her. 'Worse than Gravalax, if I'm any judge. We've taken out the patriarch, so that ought to slow them down a bit, but another purestrain will evolve to replace it before too long, you can bet on that.' She turned a little, with a faint humming of servos, and glanced at Zemelda, who was still standing behind me with her mouth hanging open, the stubber dangling slackly from her hand. 'Who's your little friend, by the way?'

'Zemelda Cleat,' I said, looking from one woman to the other as though we'd all just met casually in a ballroom somewhere. 'An unfortunate bystander. Zemelda, this is Inquisitor Vail, an old friend of mine.'

'Inquisitor?' Zemelda's face paled even further, if that were possible, and she looked for a moment as if she was about to make a run for it on general principle, but common sense reasserted itself and she remained rooted to the spot. Amberley nodded, and smiled at her, the warm friendly grin most people seemed to find reassuring.

'Of the Ordo Xenos. So unless you're an alien, you needn't worry about anything I might do.'

'I see.' The snack vendor clearly didn't, but smiled hesitantly in turn nonetheless. 'No one will ever believe me, you know, about meeting a real live inquisitor, and a commissar.' She glanced at me again, and something seemed to click behind her eyes. 'Oh wow, I've just realised, you're *that* commissar. Cain: the one who liberated Perlia, and all that other stuff.' Flattering as it was to be recognised by, now that I had the leisure to appreciate the fact, quite an attractive young woman, I began to feel a little concerned. The way she was babbling looked to me like nothing so much as delayed shock, which I suppose wasn't all that surprising under the circumstances. 'That settles it, they'll definitely think I'm making it all up.'

'I'm afraid you won't be able to tell anyone,' Amberley said kindly, no doubt coming to the same conclusion as I had. 'My presence here's a secret, and so is the real nature of the enemy.' She raised the right arm of the power suit, and for a moment I found myself wondering if she was simply going to solve the problem with a quick burst of bolter fire, but she was merely reaching out to open the food locker on Zemelda's somewhat battered-looking tricycle. She extricated a lump of something encased in greyish pastry with surprising dexterity given the bulk of the mechanical claws encasing her hands, then stopped, with a rueful expression. 'I'm sorry, I haven't got any change. No pockets in this thing. Ciaphas, can you

lend me a couple of credits?’

‘I think so.’ I rummaged in the depths of my coat for a handful of currency. Zemelda shook her head.

‘Forget it. You just saved my life. That ought to be worth a portion of glop at least.’ She shrugged. ‘Besides, the insulation’s been punctured, so they won’t stay hot long enough to sell anyway. Just help yourselves.’

In truth the snacks didn’t seem all that appetising to me, but Amberley had evidently had a strenuous afternoon of it (quite how much I was to discover later), and piled in with almost as much alacrity as Jurgen did once he’d realised there was free food on offer.¹⁷

‘He’ll live,’ my aide reported around a mouthful of reconstituted protein, with a final glance back at Nyte, who was looking a little happier now the bleeding was staunch and his rescuer comfortably downwind again. ‘Do you want me to check on the others?’

‘No point.’ Amberley licked a trickle of gravy from the corner of her mouth, and consulted an auspex screen embedded in her helmet. ‘I’m not picking up any more life signs in the vicinity, so we might as well get moving again.’

‘Moving where?’ I asked.

Amberley glanced at the manhole cover she’d emerged from a few moments before. ‘Where do you think?’ she asked, hoisting Nyte over her shoulder with one hand as she spoke.

‘What about the bodies?’ I asked. ‘If the ’stealer presence is supposed to be a secret...’

‘Not a problem,’ she assured me cheerfully, detaching something from a clip on the power suit and lobbing it casually away. ‘There’s so much spilled promethium around, it’ll incinerate all the evidence.’ She took a couple of steps towards the dark hole in the carriageway, and glanced back in our direction. ‘I’d step it up a bit if I were you. That inferno charge only had a two minute timer.’

Well that was enough to get me moving, you can be sure of that. Pausing only to grab Zemelda by the arm and urge her into motion, as I’d already had one jaunt through a ’stealer infested undercity with Amberley and wanted as many warm bodies between me and potential trouble as possible, I sprinted for the relative safety of the tunnels. We barely made it, shrugging the heavy metal plate into place behind us, before the ground shook over our heads and a faint pattering of dust drifted down from the

ceiling to discolour my cap.

Zemelda coughed diffidently. 'Excuse me,' she said, looking rather lost in the glow from the luminators built into Amberley's suit, 'but what do we do now?'

Well that was a pretty good question, of course, but to my complete lack of surprise Amberley was well on top of it, setting off at what looked like a leisurely pace, but which left the rest of us trotting to keep up. The tunnels were broad and high, lined with cables and ducting which meant nothing to me, but which I assumed had something to do with the infrastructure of the city above our heads.

The local tech-priests were obviously frequent visitors, judging by the fresh wax seals set on junction boxes every dozen metres or so, and the faint lingering scent of burned incense that hovered in the air, almost obscured by the fresher ones of dust and damp. A couple of times we passed shrines to the Omnissiah, and I took fresh heart from their presence. I've never really understood the doctrinal aspects of the clockwork model of the Emperor the cogboys¹⁸ worship, but if they were down here as often as those icons implied, there wouldn't be much risk of running into a 'stealer cult. (Not that I'd really expect to this close to the surface, they tend to go to ground in the lower depths, but by now, as you'll appreciate, I was hardly in the mood to take anything much for granted.)

It was at about that point I noticed another light in the distance, moving towards us, and began to draw my weapons again. Amberley didn't seem terribly concerned, though, just glancing in my direction with a faint moue of amusement, before calling out a cheery greeting.

'I found them,' she said.

'Splendid.' I recognised the speaker at once, although he hung back in the middle of the group, his scribe's robes looking even more incongruous than usual in this utilitarian environment. Even if I hadn't spotted his face and his distinctive attire, his dry, pedantic voice would have identified him immediately, not to mention his logorrhea. 'I would have estimated your chances of an opportune arrival, given the maximum sustainable speed of that armour and a relatively unencumbered route to the surface, at approximately eighty-seven and two-thirds per cent, although my observations of the tunnel system as we followed the path you took would probably reduce that to somewhere in the order of eighty-six and a

quarter...'

'Hello Mott,' I said, and Amberley's savant finally stopped babbling for long enough to nod a cordial greeting.

'Commissar Cain. A pleasure to see you again.' I braced myself for another torrent of verbiage, but apparently the phrase didn't trigger any more random associations in his peculiar augmented mind, for which I was profoundly grateful. As we drew nearer to the little knot of people, I wasn't surprised to find another familiar face, hanging back as far as possible. Divining the reason for her reticence I nudged Jurgen back to the rear of our party too, trying to maximise the distance between them.

'And Rakel. How are you keeping?' Mad as ever would be my guess, but Amberley's pet psyker seemed as lucid as she ever got, simply staring at Jurgen with a degree of loathing even more profound than most people's. But then most people wouldn't actually pass out or go into convulsions if he got close to them.¹⁹

'I feel the shadow,' she mumbled, her flat nasal tones setting my teeth on edge as usual, 'and it's hungry.' She was dressed in fatigues, which, like most of the clothes she seemed to possess, looked a little too small for her, displaying rather too much of her generous décolletage as a result. But by her standards, I suppose, they were practical. To my surprise she was carrying a laspistol. I'd have thought with a weapon in her hands she'd be more of a danger to anyone with her than to the enemy, but if Amberley believed she could be trusted with it I wasn't going to argue.

'That's a shame,' I said dryly. 'We could have brought some more of those pasties with us if we'd known.'

'Ciaphas.' Amberley looked at me reprovingly. 'Don't tease the psyker. She's had a hard day.'

'We all have,' a cheerful young man with an unruly blond fringe said. There were three members of the party I didn't recognise, two of them the kind of hired muscle Amberley had employed briefly on Gravalax until the 'stealers got them, while the third was enveloped in the robes of a tech-priest. I nodded a cordial greeting, feeling a great deal happier for being surrounded by people with guns. (Apart from Rakel, of course, but unless she pointed it at me or Jurgen there didn't seem much point in objecting.)

'I'll look forward to hearing about it,' I said, 'as soon as we get to wherever we're going.'

'Didn't I tell you?' Amberley asked ingenuously, Nyte still lolling across

her shoulder like a feebly twitching scarf. 'We're going to the Arbites building.' She grinned at me again. 'I'd hate you to miss your appointment.'

'How very considerate,' I said, determined not to seem too surprised by anything she told me. 'Is that where you entered the undercity?'

'That's right,' the young fellow confirmed. He had an autogun slung across his shoulder, and a bandolier of magazines around his chest. Like Rakel he was dressed in plain fatigues, although his fitted properly, and hadn't been left unfastened to an indecorous degree. He seemed to have appointed himself Zemelda's guide, which she certainly wasn't objecting to, his affable demeanour matched by a face which, if not exactly handsome in the conventional sense, was pleasant enough, accentuated by the shock of blond hair that fell into his eyes constantly. Every time it did so he twitched it away, with a gesture so automatic he seemed genuinely unaware of it, and which I assumed accounted for his nickname until the first time I saw him fade into a patch of shadow. 'The name's Pelton, by the way, but my friends call me Flicker.'

'What do your enemies call you?' Zemelda asked archly, and Pelton shrugged.

'Haven't got any,' he said, 'I killed them all.' Zemelda laughed, but I felt a shiver go down my spine. Back on Gravalax Amberley had recruited a group of murderers and psychopaths for a raid on a genestealer nest, and one of them had turned on us at the worst possible moment.

No doubt sensing my unease, Amberley smiled at me. 'Flicker's harmless,' she assured me. 'Unless I tell him not to be.'

I nodded at the other man, who had taken point next to Rakel, either by prior arrangement or on his own initiative. 'What about him?' I asked.

If anything her smile grew broader. 'Simeon? Oh, he's dangerous all right. Mostly to himself, though.' I had no trouble believing that. The man was slightly built, but seemed to burn with a nervous energy that was almost a visible glow in the gloom-enshrouded tunnels. He wore a sleeveless vest festooned with equipment pouches, and his lank, greasy hair just failed to hide the thin, flexible tube running into the base of his skull from somewhere beneath it. 'I found him in a penal legion, one where they use chemical injectors to keep the cannon fodder in line. 'Slaughter, psychon, blissout, you name it, he's addicted. Remove his implant, and he'll die. Sooner or later he will anyway. In the meantime, the automatic systems keep him more or less stable by varying the proportions of the cocktail.'

‘I can see how someone like that would be useful,’ I said slowly. ‘For as long as the tranqs work, anyway.’

‘He earned his keep in that ’stealer nest,’ Amberley said. ‘Gave him a quick blast of ’slaught and let him go. It was all I could do to keep up with him, and in this thing, that’s really saying something.’ I nodded.

‘Why didn’t you use the power suit on Gravalax?’ I asked. Amberley shrugged, the servos whining as they tried to match the movement, and Nyte’s recumbent form swayed slightly across her shoulder.

‘That was supposed to be a recon sweep,’ she reminded me. ‘This thing’s all very well when I’m expecting a stand-up fight, but it’s not exactly tailored for sneaking around in.’ The servos whined again. ‘Besides, it’s not entirely reliable. Keeps breaking down at inconvenient moments.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with the suit,’ the tech-priest admonished, in the distinctive burr of the Caledonia system. ‘If you will keep standing in the way of heavy weapons fire, I can only do so much to keep it running.’ He waved a dismissive mechadendrite in my direction. ‘While she was running about on Gravalax with you, I was rebuilding the primary fluid link and re-sanctifying the fusion bottle.’

‘I didn’t hear you complaining while you were standing behind me,’ Amberley replied, her bantering tone enough to confirm that the tech-priest had evidently been a part of her retinue for at least as long as Mott and Rakel.

The tech-priest shrugged, a surprisingly human gesture for one of his calling, although it seemed a little stiff, hinting at extensive augmetic enhancements beneath his grubby white robe. A pair of mechadendrites waved lazily above his shoulders, and the eyes beneath his hood were blank and reflective in the light from the luminators. ‘A true servant of the Omnissiah gives thanks for his protection whatever form it comes in,’ he shot back. ‘And bolters are bad for my health.’ His silver eyes regarded me thoughtfully. ‘As it seems my lady can’t be bothered with introductions, I’m Cogitator Yanbel.’

‘Ciaphas Cain,’ I said automatically. I gestured in the general direction of my aide, who seemed to have found another of Zemelda’s snacks in one of the utility pouches he was habitually festooned with, and was getting most of it more or less into his mouth. ‘And that’s Jorgen. Don’t be fooled by your initial impression, he is tolerable most of the time. If you don’t stand too close.’

‘The blank.’ Yanbel nodded. ‘I know. She’s gone to a lot of trouble to get you both here.’ He broke off as Amberley gave him a sharp look, and then turned her dazzling smile on me. The news the tech-priest had let slip hardly came as a surprise, but it wasn’t exactly welcome. Although the prospect of spending some time with Amberley before she dragged me off on whatever suicidal escapade she had in mind went a long way towards making up for it.

‘That’s flattering,’ I said, addressing her directly. ‘But I can’t help wondering why.’

‘All in good time.’ The coquettish expression I knew all too well was on her face now, and I knew there was no point pressing the matter. ‘Keesh will explain. There’s a lot more going on here than I can sum up in a couple of sentences.’ The sparkle of mischief was in her eyes again. ‘Besides, I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise.’

‘Surprise?’ I asked, trying to keep the undertone of trepidation out of my voice. Amberley nodded.

‘You’ll see,’ she said cheerfully.



FIVE

A short while later we came to a halt outside a heavy iron door, like many of the others we'd passed on our walk from the site of the ambush, and Simeon flattened himself against the wall as though anticipating another attack. His febrile gaze kept flickering back and forth along the tunnel, alert for any signs of movement that might betray an enemy, and I noticed for the first time that his pallid face and arms were seamed with old scar tissue. He carried a shotgun, presumably because he wasn't able to make use of anything that required much in the way of accuracy, and he kept it held close to his body, ready to bring it to bear with the unthinking ease of a combat veteran.

Every time his eyes swept across me as he shifted his gaze from one direction to the other he seemed to flinch, and, as you'll appreciate, I found this a trifle disconcerting given his evident mental state and the fact that he was armed. I mentioned this to Amberley, and she shook her head.

'It's not you,' she said, pushing against the door. The metal bent a little, but failed to move, and she took a step back, sighing with irritation. 'It's your uniform.' Well, that made sense, I supposed, it would have been his regimental commissar who'd consigned him to the living hell of the penal legions in the first place.

'What did he do?' I asked, curious in spite of myself, and Amberley shrugged, with the whining of servos I was beginning to become so familiar with.

'Cracked under pressure. He ordered an entire platoon executed for failure to salute a superior officer in the middle of an artillery barrage, and shot seven troopers himself with his sidearm before he was brought down. Tragic.'

‘It happens.’ I shrugged too. ‘Some junior officers just can’t take the pressure of combat. That’s why we have commissars.’

‘He *was* a commissar,’ Amberley said, and I looked at the poor wretch with a curious amalgam of horror and pity. You hear stories about members of the Commissariat who go off the deep end, but no one ever pays them much mind, and it was the first time I’d ever seen one of my compatriots brought so low. I had little time to brood about it, though.

‘Scuse me.’ Yanbel glided smoothly past us on little wheels attached to the soles of his augmetic feet and started doing something complicated to one of the ubiquitous junction boxes with his mechadendrites, his regular hands busy with a small incense burner and, to my surprise, a viridiens paste apparently scrounged from Jurgen. He met my gaze and shrugged. ‘Been a while since lunch,’ he explained indistinctly.

Reflecting that most tech-priests of my acquaintance had been indifferent to the flavour of food, viewing it simply as fuel for the body (which I suppose under the circumstances was just as well), I took his impromptu snack as confirmation of the impression I’d long since formed that at least a mild degree of eccentricity was an essential requirement for joining Amberley’s entourage.²⁰ ‘Ah, that’s got it.’ With a hum of servos, the slab of metal began to move aside to let us in, and the tech-priest grinned at Amberley. ‘Thirty-seven seconds. Perhaps we should tell the arbitrator it’s time he updated his security protocols.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind,’ Amberley said dryly, leading the way into the brightly lit space beyond.

I followed, finding myself in a utility area not much different to those in the cellars of buildings throughout the Imperium: dust, pipe work, a scurrying rodent or two, and a staircase leading upwards. The main difference from most of the others I’d seen was the group of justicars aiming guns at us, but Amberley didn’t seem too bothered by that, and with most of her entourage between me and the weaponry I wasn’t either, at least as soon as I’d noticed that most of them were beginning to relax now that the heavy door to the undercity was beginning to close behind us.

‘The inquisitor has returned,’ the squad leader reported crisply, presumably to some higher authority through a voxcaster built into his helmet, as the fact was blindingly obvious to everyone in the room. Then his voice faltered a little. ‘With additional... personnel.’

‘I’m Commissar Cain,’ I said, stepping forward to seize the initiative

before he could get the impression that I was just another of Amberley's underlings. 'The arbitrator's expecting me. I'm afraid I got a little sidetracked on the way to our meeting.'

'That sounds like an interesting story,' a new voice chimed in from the top of the stairs. I glanced up, seeing a grey-haired man in the unmistakable black uniform of an arbitrator senioris gazing down at us with an air of mild curiosity. 'I look forward to hearing the details in more salubrious surroundings.'

'We need a medicae,' Amberley said, slipping Nyte off her shoulder and handing him casually to a couple of nearby justicars. Arbitrator Keesh stood back to let them pass, and resumed his position at the top of the stairs.

'What about the other two?' he asked.

'They didn't make it. Sorry.' Amberley glanced in my direction. 'Ciaphas will fill you in, I'm sure.'

'Aren't you sitting in on the briefing?' Keesh asked.

Amberley shook her head. 'I'll join you as soon as I've changed into something more comfortable,' she said, and led her band of misfits, now apparently augmented by Zemelda for the foreseeable future, up the staircase and out of sight. Accustomed as I was to reading people's body language, I could hardly help noticing the way Pelton and Keesh avoided eye contact with one another, each of them positively bristling as they passed, Pelton's conversation with the green-haired snack-seller apparently becoming the most engrossing piece of small talk in the galaxy, while the arbitrator's attention was taken up completely with routine status reports.²¹ There was no time to wonder about that either, as Jurgen and I were approaching the top of the staircase ourselves by this time.

'Commissar Cain.' Keesh stuck out a hand to shake mine, which I took automatically, and smiled with every sign of sincerity. 'Welcome to Periremunda. I'm sorry your reception wasn't quite as cordial as we would have liked.'

'That's all right,' I said smoothly. 'I'm sorry we dented your car.'

'It must have been a simple case of mistaken identity,' Keesh said, once we were comfortably settled in his office and I'd run through a quick and concise summary of our adventures on the way in from the aerodrome. It was a large, well-appointed room several storeys up, with a spectacular view across the city and the open wilderness beyond, the sky flaring red and

gold as the sun finally set behind the spires of rock on the horizon. 'The insurgents obviously thought it was me in the car, and hoped my removal would cripple our efforts to root them out.'

'That sounds plausible,' I agreed, sipping a goblet of amasec of even finer quality than the vintage I'd found in the decanter that had been vaporised by Amberley's firebomb. 'I've hardly been here long enough to have made any enemies of my own.'

'Other than the one we're all facing,' Amberley said dryly. She was sprawling on a sofa against one of the walls, having donned a gown of a smoky grey colour, which set off the blue of her eyes very nicely, a delicate porcelain cup of recaf in her hand.

I nodded in agreement. 'Just how deeply entrenched is the 'stealer infiltration?' I asked.

'Deeply enough,' Keesh said, staring out at the luminators beginning to spark into life across Principia Mons. 'Judging by the number of cells we've uncovered in the last year, they've been here for generations. No one even suspected their presence until they began their campaign of insurrection.'

'Which raises the question of why now?' I glanced at Amberley. 'We're in big trouble, aren't we?'

'We are.' She shrugged, setting up ripples in the misty material, which fell away from her shoulder. 'At least we've taken out the broodlord, which ought to leave them disorganised, here at any rate. There are bound to be others, in nests on other plateaux.'

'Like Hoarfell?' I asked anxiously, and to my relief she shook her head.

'We can't rule it out, of course, but that seems unlikely. We've had no reports of unrest there yet.' She looked at me appraisingly, no doubt divining my main concern. 'Of course they're bound to have a cell of hybrids in place. Darien's a large enough city for them to hide in, even without a tunnel complex below it.'

'That's true,' I agreed, the memory of the sprawling conurbation I'd seen from the air filling my mind. There was no point worrying about it at the moment, though. 'Can I tell Colonel Kasteen what we're really facing?'

'You might as well,' Amberley conceded, after a quick exchange of glances with Keesh, who was clearly unhappy about that but understandably disinclined to argue with an inquisitor. His disquiet had obviously registered with her, however, as she returned her gaze to the

arbitrator almost at once. 'The 597th helped to clear up the 'stealer infestation on Gravalax,' she explained, 'and they've fought tyrannids before too. They'll be far more effective if they know what they're dealing with.'

'I see.' Keesh nodded, somewhat mollified. 'Then by all means tell them, commissar. I assume you can rely on your colonel's discretion?'

'Of course,' I said, trying not to sound nettled at the question. I'm sure I'd have asked the same thing in his position.

'Very well.' Keesh turned, and activated a hololith built into his desk. A slowly-rotating image of Periremunda appeared, flickering slightly in the manner of most such devices, blue icons marking the major population centres, and red ones the locations of cult cells tracked down and eliminated in the last year or so since they'd begun to show their hand. Amber dots marked the ones where some members were believed to have escaped the cleansing zeal of the justicars and the PDF, and a rash of sickly purple ones the locations where the existence of cells was suspected, but unproven. He nodded at Amberley. 'I can see why you insisted on that particular regiment being assigned here if that's the case.'

'It seemed prudent,' Amberley said, with the faintest of glances at Jurgen, who sat uncomfortably in the corner of the room, chewing absently on yet another of the snacks he'd squirreled away in the depths of his uniform. Divining her hidden meaning, I couldn't help agreeing with her. My aide's peculiar gift had disrupted the telepathic bond of the brood we'd discovered in the tunnels beneath Mayoh,²² and it might prove equally effective here. Of course that implied that she expected us to get close enough to the damn things for his abilities to kick in, which was somewhat disturbing in itself. To distract myself from the thought, I indicated the hololith.

'Can we see the disposition of our own forces on that?'

'Of course.' Keesh manipulated the controls, and a reassuring number of green icons appeared. I recognised the identifying code of the 597th easily enough, and the other Guard regiments seemed as well deployed as could be expected under the circumstances, two of them being stationed right here in the capital. The vast majority of Imperial units registering, however, were PDF ones, and I noted how many of them were deployed in close proximity to amber or purple contacts with a fair degree of trepidation.

I indicated them with a wave of my hand. 'I take it these units are considered potentially unreliable?' I asked, and Keesh nodded.

'Of course,' he said. I felt a shiver of apprehension as I took in the full

scale of the problem. Not all of those PDF units would be compromised, of course, but enough of them would be to make assigning them anywhere something of a risk. I'd seen infected troopers turning against their own comrades without a second's warning on Keffia and Gravalax, and even the possibility that it might happen would have a corrosive effect on morale. Worse still, as the scale of the problem became steadily more apparent, the escalating levels of mistrust among the ranks would inevitably lead to clashes and friendly fire incidents between units completely free of infection.

I contemplated the turmoil about to descend on our heads with a growing sense of trepidation. If even a fraction of what I was seeing here was true, Periremunda was on the brink of collapse into an abyss of anarchy far worse than anything I'd seen on Keffia or Gravalax. On those worlds the genestealer infiltration had been discovered in time, and effectively neutralised before the boil could burst, so to speak, but here it was already beginning to suppurate. It was at that point I noticed an unfamiliar icon among what was beginning to look like a pitifully small proportion of healthy green smudges, and pointed to it in some perplexity.

'What's that?' I asked. 'It's not Guard or PDF.'

'It's a convent,' Keesh explained, evidently surprised that I hadn't recognised the sigil. 'The Order of the White Rose²³ keep a small chapter house here, blessing Periremunda with their presence.' He shrugged. 'That is indeed fortunate for us, under the circumstances.'

'Quite,' I said diplomatically. That was all we needed, a bunch of psalm-singing fanatics in power armour getting in the way of a properly coordinated military response. I hadn't had much personal contact with the Ecclesiarchy's orders militant in the past, but on the few occasions I had done, I'd found their undeniable martial prowess so closely allied with the worst kind of Emperor-bothering tunnel vision that deploying them effectively in anything resembling a coherent battle plan was all but impossible. The best you could hope for was to point them in the vague direction of something important to the enemy, shout 'heretic!' and leave them to it. If you were lucky they'd put a useful dent in the opposing forces, and even if they didn't, at least you'd got them out of the way before they started preaching at you.

'I'm sure we can find something useful for them to do,' Amberley said, clearly no more convinced of that than I was.

Something about the way she spoke started the palms of my hands itching again, and I looked at her narrowly, a sudden ghastly suspicion beginning to stir at the back of my mind. 'There's something else you haven't told me, isn't there?' I asked, meeting her gaze. After a moment she nodded.

'There is, but it's still highly classified. You can tell your colonel, and Major Broklaw if you see fit, but if it goes any further than that before the official briefing I'm going to be quite seriously put out.'

'I see.' I nodded, not wanting to picture the consequences of Amberley losing her temper. 'And this information is?' I was by no means sure that I wanted to know, but I could hardly back down now without losing face. I was certain Amberley had more than an inkling of my true character by this time, but Keesh certainly still believed the legend of Cain the Hero, and disabusing him looked like being a very bad idea.

Amberley took a decorous sip of her recaf. 'You heard Rakel back in the tunnel,' she said, and I nodded. It had seemed like the usual gibberish at the time, but now, knowing what I did about the scale of the infestation, her words made a horrifying kind of sense.

'She said something about a shadow,' I said, trying to look as though the mouthful of amasec that followed those words had simply been a thoughtful pause rather than an attempt to hide a panic-stricken gulp, 'and that it was hungry.'

I stared at the rash of icons marking the known and probable 'stealer cults, scarcely daring to believe the conclusion I couldn't help drawing from the evidence. 'They've started calling, haven't they?'

'They have.' Amberley nodded in confirmation, placing her recaf cup on a nearby occasional table, as apparently unperturbed as if we'd merely been chatting about the weather. 'Rakel noticed it a few days ago. That's why we raided the nest, hoping to disrupt it by taking out the patriarch.'

'Has it worked?' Keesh asked, and to my inexpressible relief Amberley nodded.

'To some extent. The telepathic network between the 'stealers and hybrids is still in place, of course, but without the brood lord to act as a link to the hive mind it's not acting as a beacon any more.' She shrugged. 'Of course this was only the strongest signal, but we can hope the other nests are so much weaker they're not getting through yet. Maybe that will give us enough time to shut them down too.'

'If Rakel can stand the strain,' I said, feeling an unexpected pang of

sympathy for the psyker. True, she had a voice like fingernails on a blackboard, and was almost completely round the bend even on a good day, but being subjected to the unholy keening of a genestealer feeding call in her head couldn't have been an awful lot of fun. And to have to go actively seeking it again, Emperor knew how many times, seemed an awful lot to load on her fragile mind and chubby shoulders. 'I take it that was why she was with you?'

Amberley nodded. 'Led us right into the heart of the nest,' she said, and grinned. 'They couldn't have been expecting visitors, there were hardly any guards in the way.'

Recalling my own frantic duel with the patriarch of the Gravalax cult, chainsword against claws quite capable of ripping their way into a Baneblade, I shook my head ruefully.

'I don't suppose they thought they needed any,' I said, as insouciantly as I could. 'In my experience a brood lord can take care of himself.'

'He made a fight of it,' Amberley agreed, the flicker of darkness in her eyes momentarily at odds with the conversational tone of her voice. 'But the suit helped, and the others kept the purestrains off my back while I finished him off.'

Despite her casual air, I couldn't help picturing something of the horror of that pitched battle in the shadows beneath our feet, and nodded slowly. She and her companions had been lucky to get out alive, and there was no guarantee that they'd be so fortunate the next time. Of course if she hadn't, or hadn't been monitoring the justicars' vox frequencies and heard what was going on as they neared the surface, Jurgen and I would both have been killed as well, and events on Periremunda would have taken a very different course.

'But she can still feel the shadow,' I said, returning to the psyker's words. 'Does that mean...'

'Yes.' Amberley nodded bleakly. 'We've cut it off all right, but the signal's already been heard. We might have bought ourselves a little more time to prepare, but there's a hive fleet on the way, and there's nothing we can do to stop it.'



Editorial Note:

Since not everyone reading this will be as familiar as the members of my own ordo (or for that matter Cain himself) with the state of the tyrannid threat as we perceived it in the early 930s of M41, the following extract may prove helpful, particularly in elucidating the precise role of the genestealer infestations which generally precede the onslaught of their hive fleets.

From The Abominable Chitin: a Concise History Of The Tyrannic Wars by Arten Burrar, 095 M42

For most of the concluding quarter of M41 it was possible to believe that the tyrannid threat to the Imperium had been, if not completely eradicated, at least effectively contained. True, isolated splinter fleets from Hive Fleet Behemoth continued to appear from time to time throughout the eastern fringe, tiny shards of the all but unstoppable juggernaut of destruction that had been halted at such terrible cost by the Ultramarines in the desperate battle to save Macragge, but, formidable as they were, they could generally be dealt with by the combined might of the Navy, Astartes, and Imperial Guard. Only rarely did they succeed in overrunning a world completely, but every time they were able to do so, replenishing their store of biomass in the process, they grew in strength. Thus the prevailing strategic doctrine, from the defeat of Behemoth in 745 right up until the horrifying discovery in the last decade of the millennium of two new fleets, each alone greater and more lethal than their predecessor by an order of magnitude, had simply been to seek out and eliminate every trace of these diabolical organisms wherever they could be found.

Given the vastness of the Imperium, and the unimaginable gulfs between the stars composing it, it was hardly surprising that these splinter fleets were to prove more than a little elusive. The tireless defenders of the Emperor's blessed domains did have one significant advantage, however, which enabled them to predict the appearance of these swarms with a fair degree of success.

It will be remembered that one of the first and most shocking discoveries made after the appearance of Behemoth was the presence of genestealers among the bewildering variety of organisms encountered by the gallant defenders of the Imperium. The insidious nature of these creatures had long been known: worlds without number had been infested with their changeling progeny, and only the vigilance of the Holy Inquisition, rooting out such cancers in the body of the Imperium with the ceaseless diligence for which we should all give thanks,²⁴ preserved many more from being irretrievably contaminated. For the first time it became apparent that these creatures were in fact the vanguard of the hive fleets, seeking out worlds ripe for plunder, and in some way calling down the tyranid hordes to feast upon them.

For decades the exact mechanism by which this was achieved remained a mystery, but after Inquisitor Agmar's perceptive analysis of the Ichar IV incident, presaging the appearance of Hive Fleet Kraken, much that had previously been little more than conjecture at last became clear. It seems that when a genestealer brood successfully infiltrates the population of a human occupied world (or, for that matter, one tainted by the presence of one of the lesser sentient races such as the orks, tau or eldar), it remains hidden, quietly building up its numbers and influence until it reaches some critical proportion of the population at large. Then the brood's telepathic link becomes so powerful that it begins to radiate outwards through the warp, acting as a beacon to the malefic entities that spawned it.

Although the unprecedented size of the Ichar IV infestation made it the first occasion on which this signal became readily detectable by astropaths across the subsector, vindicating the theory beyond all possible doubt, some inquisitors of the Ordo Xenos had already speculated that precisely this mechanism was at work, and a few even claimed to have used sanctioned psykers to successfully disrupt it on more than one occasion.²⁵ Even those who doubted the truth of the matter, or proposed alternative explanations, were forced to accept the incontrovertible fact that wherever a genestealer

cult grew strong enough to begin moving openly against the Imperial authorities a hive fleet was liable to show up within a matter of months. It thus became a matter of policy for both Munitorum and Admiralty alike to monitor such outbreaks closely, and move as many resources as could be spared from other battlefronts to the vicinity of these worlds with all due dispatch.

It must be remembered, however, that our glorious Imperium is huge, and not all the worlds so threatened were fortunate enough to be relieved in time.

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SIX

With all that to digest, you'll appreciate my return to Hoarfell was a grim one, my mood not exactly lifted by the fact that when I eventually left the Arbites building I immediately found myself surrounded by a gaggle of halfwits from the pictcasters and printsheets waving imagifiers in my face and shouting increasingly fatuous questions at me. How they'd known I'd be there I had no idea, but I harboured a pretty strong suspicion nonetheless. Amberley's presence on Periremunda was supposed to be a deep, dark secret, so a genuine Hero of the Imperium (at least so far as anybody else knew) hanging around in the general vicinity would prove to be an invaluable distraction. In any event I hid my irritation with the ease of a lifetime's dissembling, and trotted out a few platitudes about my original reason for being there. (Which, under the circumstances, I'm sure you'll appreciate was far from being the most important thing on my mind at the time, but it still needed sorting out nevertheless. In the event, I'd got Jurgen to hand all the paperwork over to someone in Keesh's office, reflecting that at least it'd give Nyte something to do while he was lounging around the place recuperating.)

'Have you any comment to make about this afternoon's terrorist attack on the star port approach road?' someone shouted, and I smiled blandly for the pict recorders.

'Anyone who threatens the Emperor's loyal subjects in any way is nothing less than a heretic in my book,' I said, deciding to play the bluff soldier, which I knew the civilian sheep would lap up. I struck a heroic pose, one hand on the hilt of my chainsword. 'I don't care how well hidden the traitors think they are, they'll be rooted out, and made to pay the full price of their treachery. You can be certain of that.' All good rabble-rousing stuff,

I'm sure you'll agree, the sort of stuff I've been spouting by rote since I got my scarlet sash, and I never expected anyone to take it seriously; not seriously enough to try to kill me, at any rate.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. At the time I thought no more of the incident, dismissing it as just another minor annoyance in what was shaping up to be a pretty bad day overall, despite the unexpected pleasures of seeing Amberley again so soon and working my way through Keesh's collection of well-matured amasec. After deflecting a few more questions with vague but reassuring platitudes, I followed Jurgan to the somewhat less luxurious car Keesh had laid on to take us back to the aerodrome, my aide's distinctive miasma parting the scrum of squabbling news gatherers almost as effectively as a burst from his lasgun would have done, and made the most of the sombre journey back to rejoin the regiment. I had a strong suspicion that it would be the last hour or so of relative peace and quiet I'd be able to enjoy for a long time to come.

'Genestealers,' Broklaw said, nodding slowly, with the expression of a man who'd just bitten into a bitterroot pastry thinking it was filled with sweetbriar. At least he didn't say 'Are you sure?' which a lot of men in his position wouldn't have been able to resist, but both he and Kasteen knew me well enough by now to know I wouldn't exaggerate about something like that. (Or at least they believed I wouldn't, which amounts to the same thing.) 'I suppose we should have guessed.'

'At least we'll know what to look out for,' Kasteen said, taking the bowl of tanna Jurgan was handing to her as she spoke. We'd convened in her new office, which was starting to look positively lived-in already, with a litter of data-slates across the surface of her desk, and a stack of empty tanna bowls teetering precariously on one edge. The command post below was looking a bit more businesslike as well, auspexes, vox units and cogitators up and running, and the usual complement of troopers scurrying about. Most of the enginseers had disappeared, which indicated that they'd got all their gadgets working as well as they ever did, and gone off to tend to our wargear, which was always a comforting prospect. The last thing we needed if the enemy mounted a surprise attack was to find half our kit malfunctioning.

I nodded, taking my own drink, and stifling a yawn. Despite my assurances to Kasteen and Broklaw before setting off for Principia Mons, the strenuous activities of the day were beginning to catch up with me. At

least the loading doors in the distance had been closed, so the howling draught I'd noticed before was absent, but it had evidently been snowing constantly in Darien the whole time I was away, and the room was distinctly chilly so far as I was concerned. I warmed my fingers around the bowl gratefully. (Apart from the augmetic ones, of course, which could barely tell the difference.)

'Pass the word down to the troopers discreetly,' I advised, 'and not a word to the local PDF.'

'Of course,' Kasteen said, leaning back in her chair. We all knew that if they'd been compromised, which was a pretty safe assumption given how widespread the 'stealer infiltration clearly was on Periremunda, tipping them off that the game was up would be certain to spark a mutiny among the contaminated units. Far better to gather what information we could quietly, pinpoint the infested ones first, and strike before they realised we were on to them.

'It sounds as though the inquisitor knows what she's doing, anyway,' Broklaw said.

Knowing Amberley as well as I did, and having already gleaned a little more than I was comfortable with about the way the Inquisition functioned (but a good deal less than I was going to discover before the battle for Periremunda was over), I found this far less reassuring than the major evidently did. I felt it would be unfair to disabuse him, however, not to mention unwise, so I held my tongue.

'Did she say anything else?' Kasteen asked, eyeing me narrowly through the steam from her tanna bowl.

Until then, to be honest, I still hadn't made up my mind whether or not to share Amberley's final bombshell with my comrades, but now she was asking me directly I couldn't see any good reason to withhold it. I trusted the two of them as much as anyone apart from Jurgen, and at least I wouldn't be the only one fretting about the news.

I nodded slowly. 'She did, but it isn't to leave this room.' I looked at them each in turn, underlining the need for discretion with all the subtlety of a second-rate actor playing to the back row of the gallery. 'She told me specifically that you two were the only other people I could trust with the information.' Kasteen and Broklaw nodded solemnly, barely even bothering to hide how smug they felt at being let in on a secret most of their superiors would remain blissfully ignorant of for the next few weeks. Of course their

satisfaction probably didn't last more than the next couple of minutes, but that was hardly my fault. I made a show of glancing at the door, to make sure it was closed, and the expressions of eager expectation grew on my colleagues' faces.

'You can rely on us,' Broklaw said.

'That's what I told the arbitrator. Inquisitor Vail, of course, knows that already,' I said.

Kasteen inclined her head at the implied compliment. 'You can assure her that her confidence wasn't misplaced,' she said. I was never quite sure how much of my personal association with Amberley she'd deduced, but she generally seemed to take it for granted that we were at least keeping in touch, and may have suspected that I was one of her loose association of covert agents. (Which of course I was from time to time, since there was no way of getting out of it: I'm sure most of the men in the galaxy are familiar with the sinking feeling that accompanies the words 'Do you think you could do me a little favour, darling?', but when the woman asking the question is an inquisitor it's even less wise than usual to say 'No'.) At least if she did think that, of course, it diverted attention from Jurgen, who was probably the biggest asset Amberley possessed, as well as the most unlikely-seeming candidate for the job.

'Good,' I said, lowering my voice instinctively, 'because if any of this gets out, the unrest we've seen so far will seem like a couple of drunks brawling in the street. The entire population will panic, and with the PDF unreliable, we'll never be able to contain it.'

'The hive fleet's been sighted, hasn't it?' Kasteen asked, her face even paler than usual.

'Not yet,' I said, 'but Amberley's convinced it's on the way. Rakel seems to think she can feel its presence in the warp.'

'Then we haven't got long,' Broklaw said. He seemed, if anything, more rattled at the news than the colonel had been, but the two of them were rallying fast, and I could hardly blame them for being somewhat disconcerted. The 597th had been formed from the depleted remnants of two other regiments, the 296th and the 301st, after the defence of Corania had reduced both to less than half of their original complement. It had been a tyranid swarm that had butchered their friends and comrades, and if the thought of facing any enemy of the Imperium was likely to give them pause, it would be the scuttling horrors of the hive fleets. Come to that, I'd

seen more than enough of the hideous creatures to last me several lifetimes by that point myself. 'I'll start putting together a contingency plan for keeping the plateau free of any spores they start dropping. If we can do that we can hold out up here pretty much indefinitely.'

'Good thinking,' Kasteen said, glancing in my direction with every sign of her usual confidence. 'One thing you can say for this frakked-up geography, it gives us a fighting chance. Most of their spores will drop into the deserts or the lava pits, where they'll have nothing to consume. We'll lose some of the plateaux, no question about that, but the uninhabited ones we can just sterilise from the air, and win back the others the old-fashioned way.'

'Well that sounds like a plan,' I said, trying to hide my own sense of relief. She was right, of course, the very conditions that made Periremunda such a nightmare when it came to rooting out the 'stealer infestation would play right into our own hands when it came to fighting the 'nids themselves. I hoped. Something told me it wasn't going to be quite as easy as that, but the thought was a comforting one, and it would do to be going on with.

'We'll start working on some immediate action drills for tackling the most common creatures too,' Kasteen added. 'If we work them in to the standard counter-insurgency training no one outside the regiment should notice, and it'll be good for the morale of our own people.'

'I'll get the company commanders preparing the ground,' Broklaw agreed. He glanced at me. 'As soon as they know we're hunting hybrids they'll want to start practising anti-tyranid techniques anyway. We don't have to tell them we already know they're going to need them.'

'Agreed,' I said, relieved to hear that our people would be as ready as possible for the coming storm without having to break the letter of my agreement with Amberley. Most of the troopers would remember all too well how the desperate battle for Corania had begun as a routine operation to clear out a genestealer cult, which had escalated rapidly into an all-out battle simply to survive once the splinter fleet the 'stealers had called arrived in orbit. Only the fortuitous presence in system of a Naval flotilla and the relative weakness of the tyranid swarm prevented the siege from turning into something far worse.²⁶ If anything, they'd be more suspicious if we weren't taking precautions against the same thing happening again. 'I'll leave it with you, then.'

Unfortunately, of course, it wasn't quite that easy. I found my way to the quarters Jurgen had found for me, a tolerably comfortable room in a quiet

corner of the garrison, which most of the Valhallans were avoiding because of the heat emitted by the power plant in the basement, and I fell into bed gratefully enough. But sleep was a long time in coming, and when it did was troubled by dreams of the tyrannid swarms I'd encountered before, sweeping across deserts and through cities like a tide of scuttling death.

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SEVEN

For the next few days, despite my understandable trepidation, Darien remained unrocked by civil insurrection: a circumstance which should have been comforting, but which just left me feeling restless and uneasy. My paranoid streak, normally so reliable, kept insisting that the longer things remained quiet the worse they were likely to be when everything finally went ploid-shaped, so I was unable to appreciate the lull as much as I'd have liked, despite the happy discovery that Darien possessed a reasonable number of good quality restaurants and discreet gaming establishments only too eager to acquire the cachet they apparently believed would be conferred by the patronage of a Hero of the Imperium. As a result my leisure time was spent pleasantly enough, despite the freezing temperatures, which my comrades in arms still seemed to think were positively sultry.

'We've completed our deployment,' Broklaw reported, gesturing to the image in the hololith, his sleeves rolled up to the elbows despite the way his breath misted into visibility with every word.

I leaned across it, brushing away the thin film of snow that my cap had acquired on the short journey from my quarters as I did so, noting the disposition of our forces. They'd been scattered all around the plateau with a speed and efficiency that I doubted anyone other than native-born iceworlders could possibly have matched, and at a first glance I could find nothing to criticise.

Two full companies, first and second, had been given the job of defending Darien, continuing to operate out of our makeshift garrison, and if that strikes you as being somewhat excessive under the circumstances you should bear in mind that the city was the largest concentration of life on Hoarfell, and would attract any tyrannid organisms that made it to the surface

as surely as Jurgen to an 'all you can eat' buffet; not to mention being the site of the star port, which represented our only line of retreat if things started going really badly.

Stuck on the top of a thin spire of rock as we were, we had precious little room for manoeuvre, and if it looked as if we were about to be overrun our only option would be to run for the shuttles and Horus take the hindmost. Not for the first time I found myself blessing the foresight of whoever had decided to billet us as close as we were to the landing field. I nodded approvingly.

'You've got the city well covered.'

'I think so,' Broklaw agreed. 'I thought about detaching a couple of platoons from first company to bolster the outer picket lines, but if things get bad enough to need them there we'll need them here even more desperately to help defend the civilians.' He spoke as if that were possible, but we all knew they'd be easy prey for the 'nids, and if the swarm ever made it into the streets of the city we'd have our work cut out just trying to survive ourselves. Any civilians managing to make it through would just be a welcome bonus.

'Fourth and fifth²⁷ look more than capable of holding the line,' I reassured him, and Kasteen nodded her agreement.

'That's what we thought,' she said briskly.

There were a handful of outlying villages scattered around the hills and valleys, most of them playing host to a platoon or two, which between them looked able to respond to any incursion within as short a time as anyone could reasonably expect given the rugged and wintry terrain. 'We've managed to overlap most of the patrol areas, so the chances of anything that makes it down staying undetected are reduced as much as possible.'

'Good thinking,' I said. I didn't really give much for anyone's chances of finding a lictor or one of the other specialised scout organisms unless the creature fancied a quick snack, but the strategy should make it more difficult for ordinary gaunts and the like to sneak through our lines unnoticed. I indicated a few scattered hamlets and mining stations with no icons marking the presence of friendly troops. 'What about these?'

Kasteen shrugged dismissively. 'Settlements with fewer than a hundred souls: barely a dozen, some of them. Not worth the effort of trying to defend.'

Well, I supposed the inhabitants might feel rather differently about their

homes, but I couldn't fault the military logic, and nodded my agreement. 'We've told the locals to evacuate to the nearest population centres. Some have, some are insisting on staying put.' She shrugged again. 'It's their call. If they want to play 'nid bait, I'm not risking any of our people to hold their hands.'

'Quite right,' I agreed, happy to have as many heavily armed troopers standing between me and the chitinous hordes as possible. I turned away from the flickering display. 'Are we making any progress on the other matter we discussed?'

'Not much,' Kasteen said, turning to lead the way up the staircase to her office. The matter in question was a little too sensitive to talk about openly where any of the common troopers might overhear us, although I was pretty sure most of them could join the dots for themselves now word had filtered down the ranks to keep an eye out for any sign of genestealer activity. She waited until I'd closed the door behind us, reducing the never-ending chatter of the command centre to a muted murmur, before continuing. 'We've been liaising with all the usual agencies, but so far we can't say for sure which of the local PDF units have been compromised.' She shrugged, handing me a data-slate, which said the same thing at much greater length, and which I replaced on her desk after a cursory glance. 'Of course we can't entirely trust any of our sources either. It's entirely possible the hybrids have infiltrated the justicars, the Administratum, star port security, and for all I know the local ecclesiarchs and refuse collectors too.'

'Pretty much what we'd expected,' I conceded, trying not to sound too disheartened at the limitless vistas of distrust her words had opened up.

Broklaw looked at me in a speculative fashion. 'Could your friend in Principia Mons be any help in narrowing it down?'

I looked thoughtful. Amberley might have some more solid information, but if she did she wasn't sharing it, and if that was the case she'd undoubtedly have excellent reasons for not doing so. In either event, I wasn't about to ask her. Need to know is practically a twenty-third verse of the creed²⁸ to most inquisitors.

'I doubt it,' I said. The matter was pretty moot anyway as she'd been out of touch for over a week, cleaning out any other nests of purestrains she'd been able to track down, in an attempt to block whatever psychic signal Rakel thought she could feel the brood lords channelling into the void. 'Besides, she's out of town.'

‘I see.’ Kasteen looked mildly disappointed. ‘Perhaps if you made a personal approach to the arbitrator?’

‘I could try,’ I said, without much hope. Keesh had been making precious little headway with the problem before we arrived, and would certainly have passed on anything new he’d uncovered that affected our position. On the other hand setting up a meeting with him would give me an excuse to return to the more equable climate of Principia Mons, at least for a short while, and after freezing my extremities off on Hoarfell for what felt like eternity I wasn’t about to let the chance of even the briefest of respites go by without grabbing at it. ‘I’ll get Jurgen to make the call.’

‘We might as well face it,’ Broklaw said, ‘the only people on the entire planet we know we can rely on are the ones in this regiment.’ He glanced at me. ‘That is still the case, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I confirmed. After my experiences on Keffia, where the infiltrating ‘stealer hybrids had managed to infect scores of the Guardsmen sent to eradicate them by the simple expedient of running bars and bordellos where likely victims could be isolated and implanted, I’d placed all such establishments firmly off limits as soon as I’d returned to Hoarfell with the unwelcome news of what we were actually facing. The troopers had grumbled, of course, but for the most part had complied with the restriction. Only a few of them had actually seen me executing the infected soldiers among our own ranks on Gravalax, but the story had got round fast enough, and no one seemed keen to be the next in line. There had been the inevitable few who’d gone ahead regardless, out of bravado or sheer stupidity, but none of them had shown the telltale wounds of implantation when the justicars had returned them to us, and I’d made sure that however much fun they’d had the night before the morning after definitely hadn’t been worth it. After that, the problem had more or less petered out.

‘Well, that’s something anyway,’ Kasteen said.

The response to my request for a meeting with Keesh was as gratifying as it was unexpected, my aide rousing me early the next morning with a mug of tanna and the news that the arbitrator himself was on the vox asking to talk to me. Hauling myself out of bed and grabbing the comm-bead from its accustomed place under my pillow, next to the laspistol, I screwed the little transceiver into my ear and took a mouth-scalding gulp of the fragrant drink while Jurgen handed me my trousers.

‘Cain,’ I said as crisply as I could while gulping for air. ‘Thank you for getting back to me so quickly.’

‘Our mutual friend made it very clear that we ought to co-operate,’ Keesh said, too astute to mention Amberley’s name or title even over an encrypted link. ‘So I thought I’d give you some advance notice of something you’ll be hearing through the usual channels in the next hour or two. We’ve just had an astropathic message from Coronus.’

‘That’s excellent news,’ I said, sipping my tanna a little more carefully this time. The mere fact that a message had got through at all meant that the hive fleet was either still some distance from Periremunda, where the shadow it cast in the warp wasn’t able to disrupt communications with us yet, or weak enough for the area of interference to be significantly smaller than usual. Keesh’s voice took on a more cautious tone.

‘Yes and no,’ he said guardedly, and I felt the palms of my hands begin to tingle again. Despite his attempt to sound unruffled, he was obviously seriously perturbed by something. ‘I’m sure you’ll be pleased to hear that we have reinforcements on the way.’ Well, that was cause for optimism anyway. He hesitated.

‘I sense a “but” coming,’ I said, managing to mask my own unease a great deal more successfully.

Keesh cleared his throat. ‘My department has uncovered some fresh intelligence which casts a disturbing new light on things. I’ve been invited by the lord general to brief all the regimental commanders in person,’ he said, the implication obvious. This was something else he didn’t want to talk about over the vox. ‘The Imperial Guard commanders anyway.’

Better and better. Keeping the PDF out of the loop only confirmed the sensitivity of whatever he wanted to tell us. My palms began to itch worse than ever. ‘And the commissars too, of course.’

‘Of course,’ I echoed, making a mental note of the time and security arrangements he began to rattle off. As the link went dead, I found myself wondering if it was too late to crawl back into bed and pull the blankets over my head until it all went away, but of course there was no chance of that. Pausing only to finish my tanna, and the hot grox bun Jurgen had managed to find for me somewhere, I went to give the colonel the good news.



EIGHT

‘Any idea at all what this might be about?’ Kasteen asked, more by reflex than because she expected an answer.

I shook my head. ‘He wasn’t very specific,’ I replied, cursing the wind that was sweeping across the star port from the lip of the plateau, barely a kilometre away from where we were standing. We’d had a number of similar exchanges over the last few hours, none of them going anywhere, and had run out of increasingly wild speculation some time back. That was probably just as well, because we were only making ourselves feel worse. Although it must be said that neither of us had managed to get anywhere close to just how bad the news we were going to hear as soon as we made it to the capital would turn out to be. I huddled a little deeper into my greatcoat, and tried not to shiver too visibly.

We were standing at the edge of a pad in the middle of the aerodrome, the engine of the Chimera that had conveyed us there rumbling quietly in the background, tainting the air with the scent of burned promethium, while a chill wind threw flurries of grubby snow in my face whichever way I turned to avoid it. None of the Valhallans with us seemed at all inconvenienced by the freezing temperature, of course, which was still positively balmy by their standards. Most of the squad accompanying us, which I’d thought to be a reasonable precaution after my last visit to Principia Mons, were wearing the greatcoats and fur hats most often associated with regiments from their home world, but all of them had left the heavy garments unfastened, revealing the standard issue flak vests beneath. (Apart from Kasteen, come to think of it, who had donned a dress uniform for the occasion, and didn’t want it getting soggy before meeting the arbitrator.)

‘Any sign of the shuttle?’ I asked Jurgen, and he shook his head

mournfully, already anticipating the discomfort of being airborne again.

‘I’ll chase them up, commissar,’ he promised dutifully, and began talking with his usual blend of calm reasonableness and unshakable tenacity to someone on his comm-bead.

‘Thank you.’ I glanced at my chronograph. ‘I wouldn’t want to keep the arbitrator *and* the lord general waiting.’ Of course technically I could keep both of them hanging about indefinitely, my position alone ensuring that, never mind my fraudulent reputation, but I was reluctant to do so. For one thing I wanted to hear whatever bad news Keesh had for us as quickly as possible, so I could start worrying about something real instead of all the horrible possibilities my imagination kept presenting me with, and for another I seemed to have made a reasonably positive impression on the lord general when we’d met back on Gravalax, and I was keen to reinforce it. In my experience it never hurt to be well in with the people in charge, especially when their decisions could materially affect my chances of getting through the next twenty-four hours with my body still in possession of most of its component parts. Mostly, though, I just wanted to get aboard the shuttle, which was ten minutes overdue already, and out of that pox-rotted wind.

‘There seems to be a bit of a problem in traffic control,’ Jurgen reported after a moment. ‘They’ve got everything in a holding pattern while they try to sort it out.’

‘What sort of a problem?’ I asked, cutting into the right frequency to hear for myself, my sense of trepidation immediately reinforced by the unmistakable flat tones of suppressed panic in the traffic controller’s voice.

‘HL 687, respond. This is Darien Down,²⁹ calling HL 687. You are continuing to deviate from your assigned trajectory. Correct course and respond immediately.’

‘They’ve lost track of one of the heavy lift dirigibles,’ Jurgen explained helpfully. ‘It was delivering a cargo of promethium to the storage tanks on the edge of the plateau, but its mooring lines broke, and it’s drifting across the field towards the city.’

‘Drifting my arse,’ Kasteen said, shading her eyes and looking upwards. A vast shadow blotted out the opalescent haze forcing its way through the snow clouds, plunging us into a partial eclipse. ‘That thing’s moving under power.’

‘You’re right,’ I said, the shiver of apprehension rippling through me at the

realisation even more acute than the effects of the wind. A low drone of engines reverberated from the snow-dusted rockcrete around us. I glanced at the idling Chimera. ‘Lustig, can we bring it down with the heavy bolters?’

‘We can give it a try,’ the veteran sergeant in charge of the squad assented, running for the vehicle. ‘Jinxie, with me.’

‘Sarge.’ Trooper Penlan, whose nickname I have to admit wasn’t entirely unmerited, doubled in her squad leader’s wake, the flash burn scar on her cheek flushing with the sudden exertion. Despite her reputation for being somewhat accident-prone, I felt Lustig had made the right choice. She was a solid and competent trooper, unlikely to lose her head, and we were going to need a steady hand on the heavy weapons if we were going to bring the gas-filled behemoth down without touching off its volatile cargo. That reminded me...

‘This is Commissar Cain,’ I broadcast, cutting in on the traffic control frequency with my commissarial override code. ‘In view of the clear and present danger to the civilian population, I’m bringing this matter under military jurisdiction at once.’ In actual fact I couldn’t give a flying frak about the civilian population, of course, but it sounded good, and if I was any judge the aerodrome staff would be only too eager to pass the problem on to anyone else daft enough to put their hand up, which of course they were. ‘How much promethium is that thing carrying?’

‘Three kilotonnes,’ the controller told me, making my blood run even colder than it had seemed to on Simia Orichalcae. ‘If it detonates...’ His voice trailed away, and I could hardly blame him; an explosion that size would level most of the city, taking the star port and our garrison along with it. With a vertiginous lurch of horrified understanding I realised at last why Amberley and Keesh hadn’t been able to uncover any ‘stealer cult activity in Darien. The damned hybrids had fled the place in preparation for this atrocity, which would surely spark panic and rioting all over the globe if it succeeded. More to the point, though, I’d be barbequed along with the rest of the city. Whatever it took, the dirigible had to be stopped.

‘Aim for the gas cells,’³⁰ I voxed Lustig and Penlan, noticing with a surge of relief that the envelope containing them extended some distance beyond the cluster of fuel tanks slung beneath the taut fabric, each one of which was large enough to have parked a whole company’s Chimeras in with room to spare. The hail of heavy explosive ordnance should rip the

relatively fragile material apart with ease, releasing the gas, and robbing the airship of lift. I turned to the other troopers. 'Target the engines.' They were a little more solid, it was true, but unarmoured all the same, and the lasbolts from our small arms ought to do a reasonable amount of damage.

'Sounds good to me,' Kasteen agreed, drawing her sidearm, and placing a couple of shots squarely into the front starboard engine, which began to leak fluid and a trickle of smoke. Only then did I remember she habitually carried a bolt pistol, but she didn't seem to have blown us up yet, so I left her to it and headed back towards the Chimera, Jurgen trotting at my heels as always. I'd be able to supervise things a lot more effectively without the wind throwing snow in my face every few seconds, possibly distracting me at a crucial moment, and if things did go horribly wrong I stood a slightly better chance of escaping the worst effects of the fireball behind a nice thick slab of armour plate. (Not an appreciably greater one, it's true, but give me the choice between virtually certain death and its absolute guarantee and I'll take the forlorn hope every time.) I half-expected Kasteen to follow, but she seemed to be having too much fun playing pop the balloon with the troopers, who had all opened up with their lasguns, knocking holes through the labouring engines with every sign of enjoyment.

I dived inside the sturdy little vehicle just as Penlan opened up with the bolter in the turret, Lustig joining in a moment later with the forward-mounted one, although he couldn't have got much elevation on it. Not that it mattered, I suppose, the target was certainly big enough. Even though it was practically on top of us by now, I could still see Lustig ripping a line of holes along its trailing edge as I stuck my head out of the top hatch to see what was going on. (A little foolhardy, perhaps, but I could always duck back inside if things looked like getting uncomfortably warm, and if I was going to preserve my unmerited reputation for leading from the front I'd need to be visible.)

'Frak,' Lustig said, the rear of the dirigible finally passing the point where he could bring our secondary armament to bear. Penlan was having no such difficulty, her eyes glued to the targeting auspex, swinging the turret around beneath me to cleave a long, jagged tear along one flank of the wallowing behemoth.

'Jurgen,' I called. 'Get this thing turned around!'

'Right you are, sir,' my aide agreed, and a moment later our idling engine roared fully into life, the Chimera's tracks flinging up a spray of freezing

slush as it slewed on the spot, bringing our forward-mounted weapon to bear again. 'How's that?'

'Good enough,' Lustig said, confirming the fact a moment later by chewing another hole through the gasbag.

'It's working!' Kasteen reported, her voice echoing tensely in my comm-bead, and glancing up at the perforated dirigible I was forced to agree. It was definitely losing lift, the fabric loose and flapping in several places where once it had been taut with the pressure of the gas within, not quite crippled, but undeniably wounded. Two of its engines were trailing smoke, but none of them had cut out yet, the fans canted downwards to provide as much extra lift as possible while maintaining its inexorable progress towards the unsuspecting city. 'Keep firing!' Possibly the most unnecessary order she'd ever given, but everyone complied with undiminished enthusiasm nevertheless, Penlan whipping the turret around to tear another handful of gas cells open so fast I almost lost my balance.

It was at that point I became aware of another danger, which had escaped me in the more immediate prospect of immolation. As the slowly descending leviathan lost ever more altitude, the mooring lines dangling beneath it were beginning to scrape along the ground like the tendrils of a vast jellyfish, raising small blizzards of ice and snow as they came. Mindful of the fact that anyone becoming entangled in one would be ripped apart, and therefore in no position to go on ensuring my safety, I issued a general warning over the vox.

'Mind out for the mooring lines,' I broadcast, with another glance upwards as I did so. That last burst of bolter shells seemed to have done the trick, anyway, the dirigible was definitely losing height and manoeuvrability, wallowing this way and that as it descended.

'Very good, sir,' Jurgen responded, taking my words as literally as he always did, and slammed the Chimera into reverse.

'Frak!' Taken unawares by the sudden jerk, Penlan's hand tightened on the traverser, swinging the turret wildly with a whine of abused servos. The hail of bolter shells veered off target, impacting somewhere in the tangle of metalwork shrouding the ominous bulk of the tanker module, bloated with its volatile cargo. She snatched her finger away from the trigger as though it had suddenly become white hot, and stared up at me, her startled eyes wide beneath her enveloping hat. 'Sorry sir, that took me a bit by surprise.'

'Me too,' I admitted, forcing a carefree smile past the rictus of terror that

seemed determined to plaster itself across my face. 'No harm done...'

'I can see flames,' Kasteen reported, her voice tenser than ever. A chill hand seemed to clamp itself around my heart, squeezing as it did so, and I forced myself to look upwards. It was true, a vivid orange bloom had appeared on the starboard tank, and, merciful Emperor, it was spreading even as I watched. Any moment now the whole cluster would blow, taking the entire star port to perdition, and us along with it. Even if we could somehow get aboard the thing and overcome the hybrids manning the flight deck we'd crippled it so badly that we'd never be able to fly it to somewhere it could detonate harmlessly, let alone manage to escape in one piece if we made the attempt.

It was at that moment inspiration struck. Glancing around desperately for some way of saving our necks, or mine at any rate, I saw one of the mooring lines scoring its way across the landing pad in front of us, a little cloud of snow, steam, and pulverised rockcrete rising around it like a miniaturised foretaste of the apocalypse to come.

'Jurgen!' I shouted. 'Ram the mooring line!'

I've no doubt that most men in his position would have at least hesitated, probably wondering if I'd lost my wits, but not least among my aide's well-hidden virtues was a dogged deference to authority, and he responded without question or a moment's pause. The Chimera rocked on its suspension as he slammed it back into a forward gear so high no other driver would even have considered attempting it, gunned the engine to a high-pitched scream that would have set the teeth of an eldar banshee on edge, and let in the clutch. Despite the abuse it had suffered the Chimera leapt forward like a hound off the leash, throwing me back against the lip of the hatch so hard I felt a bruising impact even through the thickness of my greatcoat, and found myself wishing briefly that I'd thought to don my own body armour beneath it, before all my attention became caught up in the urgent necessity of regaining my balance and hanging on. My companions at least were in seats, which protected them from the worst of the buffeting, but I didn't dare leave the vantage point of the cupola. We'd have only one chance at this, and a slender one at that. Timing was going to be absolutely crucial.

'Penlan,' I said, hoping to the Golden Throne that her wits hadn't been too addled by Jurgen's typically robust driving, 'get ready to rotate the turret on my mark. As fast as you can, and don't stop whatever happens. OK?'

‘Right sir.’ She nodded, her face grim, too seasoned a campaigner to ask any questions at so critical a juncture.

‘Brace for impact!’ Lustig called from his station next to the driver’s seat, and forewarned I did so, just as Jurgen ploughed us into the dangling hawser, thicker than my forearm, which was still gouging a shallow channel across the solid rockcrete of the landing pad. The whole vehicle shook with the violence of the collision. From my vantage point in the top hatch I could see the thick frontal armour buckling, and for a panic-stricken moment I thought it would kill the engine or turn us over, but Jurgen fought for control and our tracks bit into the solid surface beneath the thin coating of slush. Then the writhing cable was falling across us, threatening to take my head off as it lashed about, anchored for a fleeting moment by the weight of our treads.

‘Now!’ I howled, dropping through the hatch for my very life, and Penlan began to swing the turret, rotating it faster than the engineers who maintained our vehicle pool would either have believed possible or approved of. For a moment I thought my desperate gamble had failed, as it completed two full turns, then with a sound of rending metal it came to a sudden halt, filling the passenger compartment with the smell of burning insulation.

‘Sorry sir,’ Penlan said, looking at me dolefully. ‘It’s stuck.’

‘Good.’ I poked my head up again, just to make sure, and my heart leapt. The dangling cable had fouled the turret, just as I’d hoped it would, wrapping itself around it and all but tearing off the bolter, which now dangled uselessly from what remained of its mounting. ‘Jurgen, drop the ramp!’

‘Very good, sir.’ My aide complied, his voice as unconcerned as though the order was nothing more unusual than a request for more tanna, and the boarding ramp clanged down behind us, scraping against the surface of the pad as the dangling hawser jerked us around like a fish on a hook.

‘Lustig, Penlan, out!’ I bawled, wishing I could follow them, but that wasn’t going to be possible just yet, and the two troopers obeyed at once, discipline and their unaccountable confidence in me combining to get them moving even faster than I’d expected. As they bailed out past me I drew my chainsword, and began hacking at the heavy hinges supporting the thick slab of metal. ‘Jurgen, go! Head straight for the edge!’

‘Ciaphas?’ Kasteen’s voice sounded a little strange for some reason, less

crisp and incisive than usual. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'I'm not entirely sure,' I admitted, as my screaming blade began to cut through the hinges in a shower of sparks almost as spectacular as the one being left in our wake by the dragging ramp. With our engine howling in protest we began to move, painfully slowly at first, our hull booming as though from a series of heavy weapon strikes as the abused metal took the strain of the tangled cable and the immense inertia of the slowly falling dirigible. Abruptly the boarding ramp fell free, and we lurched forwards, picking up speed. 'But it's all I can think of.'

'Emperor be with you,' Kasteen said, and fighting down the suspicion that it could very well be the other way round in a few more minutes if my luck didn't hold, I waved at her as insouciantly as I could and hurried back to the seat so recently vacated by Lustig.

'Which way, sir?' Jurgen asked, his vision slit all but obscured by the dangling cable and the spider web of cracks radiating across the armourcrys. Truth to tell, the gunner's station wasn't much better, but I could see enough through the sights of the bolter to guide us, and to my immense relief the weapon still appeared to be functional. That would make things a little easier, at least.

'A bit more to the left,' I said, catching sight of one of the vivid orange reflectors marking the boundary of the landing field, and taking us as far away from the promethium dock as I could. There was no point in making things even worse than they already were, if that was possible. The battered APC responded to his nudge on the controls with what sounded like a groan of resignation.

'Ciaphas!' Kasteen's voice was urgent in my comm-bead. 'It's losing height faster than ever. It's going to come down right on top of you!'

'Then we'd better make this quick,' I said, fighting the impulse to look up and see just how close three thousand tonnes of burning promethium was getting. 'How's the fire?'

'Spreading fast,' she said grimly. Better and better. Forcing the matter to the back of my mind by an act of will that vaguely surprised me, I returned my attention to the sights of the bolter, and the narrow strip of snow-powdered rockcrete I could see through them. I was only going to get one shot at this.

'Can you jam the throttle open with something?' I asked Jurgen, and he nodded, directing a blast of halitosis in my direction as he glanced over to

reply.

‘No problem,’ he assured me, beginning to rummage through his motley collection of pouches and webbing with his free hand. ‘Oh, I wondered what had happened to that.’ He pulled out what looked suspiciously like the fossilised remains of one of Zemelda’s pastries, although as I was concentrating on the bolter at the time, and understandably disinclined to bring the thing in his hand any further out of my peripheral vision than I had to, I might have been mistaken. At any event he jammed whatever it was into the slot of the throttle control, and nodded in evident satisfaction. ‘Firm as our faith in the Emperor,’ he said cheerfully.

‘Good,’ I said, hoping it was a good deal firmer than mine, but now was hardly the time to consider the matter. The perimeter wall of the star port was looming up ahead of us, and I triggered the bolter, hoping the barrier was as fragile as I’d deduced. Often they’re more like fortifications than boundaries, intended to contain the blast of a shuttle accident, but here there would be no point in taking that kind of precaution. The only thing beyond the wall was a sheer drop of Emperor knew how many kilometres, and it was only there at all to keep the occasional star port employee visiting the outlying installations from falling off the edge. With any luck it had been put together as cheaply as possible, and no more solidly than most civilian constructions.

To my immense relief, I was right: the wall ahead of us disintegrated in a hail of heavy ordnance and brick dust, revealing a terrifyingly narrow strip of snow-dusted scrub, with a vertiginously disconcerting vista of cloud tops beyond.

‘Ciaphas! It’s right on top of you!’ Kasteen shouted, her voice shrill in my comm-bead, and I leapt out of my seat.

‘Run for it!’ I yelled to Jurgen, and we pelted for the yawning gap at the back of the Chimera, our boots ringing on the floor plating almost loudly enough to drown out the complaints of its battered bodywork and overloaded engine. We jumped almost simultaneously as the floor beneath us lurched and fell away, bounding over the rubble where the wall had been and disappearing over the lip of the bottomless chasm.

For an instant I wondered if we were going to make it. Then my boots impacted on frost-slick grass, and I lost my balance, falling heavily to my knees. For a panic-stricken moment as I scrabbled for purchase I thought I was sliding back over the rim of that terrible abyss. Then my hands caught

hold of a bush clinging tenaciously to the edge of the world, and my heart began to slow. I took a deep breath, my aide's familiar miasma informing me that he'd made it too, and staggered to my feet.

'There she goes,' Jorgen remarked conversationally, seating himself on the remaining stub of wall as the blazing dirigible scraped the top of the undamaged sections on either side of the breach we'd made, dislodging a small avalanche of bricks as it went. My breath caught in my throat, and I found myself thankful I hadn't been able to see just how far the flames had spread during our wild ride across the apron. They were licking greedily all round the promethium tanks, the metal glowing red with the heat, and disaster must surely be imminent.

Slowly the wounded behemoth toppled into the abyss, faster and faster as the last remaining vestiges of gas escaped, weighed down by its own lethal cargo and the swinging plumb bob of our gallant Chimera.

'Ciaphas! Are you there?' Kasteen asked in my ear, and I took a deep breath, steadying my voice as best I could.

'I'm fine,' I assured her, 'Jorgen too.' Something rumbled like distant thunder, and a moment later a blast of heat scorched past our faces, flashing the snow around us into steam. Far below, the clouds glowed ackenberry red, as though the sun were somehow setting beneath our feet. I took another deep breath, trying not to cough as I inhaled the warm mist surrounding us. 'But I'm afraid we're going to need another Chimera.'



Editorial Note:

The following is appended without comment, other than that it was typical of innumerable other such effusions published at the time.

From *Periremunda Today: The News That Matters to Your Planet*, 224 933 M41

COMMISSAR HERO SAVES DARIEN! FIERY APOCALYPSE AVERTED!

Sources close to the Arbites office in Principia Urbi³¹ have confirmed the rumours, rife since midmorning, that the terrorists waging their despicable campaign against all that is good and holy on our Emperor-blessed globe have been thwarted in their most audacious attack to date by none other than Commissar Ciaphas Cain, the celebrated Hero of the Imperium, whose recent vow to personally crush the traitors in our midst did so much to hearten our beleaguered citizenry.

The valorous commissar was present at the aerodrome in Darien when a promethium tanker, whose crew had been infiltrated by the heretic scum, was directed towards the heart of the city in a suicidal attempt to detonate the cargo it was carrying, obliterating both a strategically vital star port and over a million innocent lives. Acting on the instant, with never a thought for his personal safety, Commissar Cain attached a mooring rope from the dirigible to a nearby tank, driving it over the lip of the plateau, and dragging the deadly cargo to its destruction scant moments before the explosion, which would have dealt so mortal a wound to that defenceless community.

Fortunately for Periremunda, and the Imperium of which our beloved home world is such a vital part, Commissar Cain was spared by the Emperor's grace from sharing in the fate of those whose fell design he so heroically thwarted, escaping unscathed to continue his unrelenting quest to uncover and eliminate His Divine Majesty's enemies wherever they may be hiding.

Commissar Cain's outstanding courage and devotion to duty was witnessed by Colonel Regina Kasteen, the statuesque redheaded Valkyrie who commands the regiment to which he is attached. Asked if there is any truth to the rumours of a romantic liaison between them, she coyly declined to comment.³²

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NINE

News, it seemed, travelled fast on Periremunda, and once again I found myself wondering if Amberley had given it a little nudge.³³ When we arrived at the aerodrome on Principia Mons we were almost immediately surrounded by a scrum of pictcasters and printscribes baying like orks about my supposed heroism back on Hoarfell. Luckily Kasteen and I had retained our escort, despite the loss of the Chimera, and we were able to walk through the horde unmolested, while Lustig and his troopers kept them at arms length by the judicious use of gun butts and profanity. Perhaps equally fortunate, from my point of view, was the fact that the Valhallans regarded the climate this low down as uncomfortably sultry to say the least, which meant they'd discarded their greatcoats, and Kasteen's light summer dress uniform showed off her figure to considerable advantage, thus deflecting a fair amount of attention in her direction.

'Commissar. Colonel.' Nyte was waiting for us at the entrance to the concourse, looking a bit frayed around the edges but reasonably fit under the circumstances, surrounded by a knot of armed justicars. Clearly he was determined not to make the same mistake twice, and I began to regret the loss of our Chimera a little less. He nodded a formal greeting, pointedly ignoring Jorgen. 'I hadn't expected you to bring quite so large an escort.'

'I could say the same,' I riposted, conscious of the number of eavesdroppers surrounding us, and determined to play the part everyone seemed to expect of me. Mentioning the reason for our mutual caution was, of course, out of the question. I nodded towards the exit. 'Shall we go?'

'By all means,' Nyte said, leading his superfluous justicars outside. To my surprise, instead of the groundcar I'd been expecting, the squat armoured shape of a Rhino was waiting for us, its engine grumbling, and the aquila

symbol of the Adeptus Arbites fluttering from pennants bedecking it in a manner that reminded me at once of Keesh's ill-fated limousine. He looked at it dubiously. 'I'm not sure there'll be room for everyone.'

'Team one³⁴ can ride outside,' Lustig volunteered, with a glance at the colonel. 'Keep our eyes open for any sign of trouble.'

Kasteen nodded. 'That should be perfectly satisfactory, shouldn't it?'

'Of course,' Nyte said, his tone managing to convey precisely the opposite. While the designated troopers scrambled up top, finding convenient stanchions to hang on to, the rest of us clambered inside through one of the side doors, which clanged shut behind us with reassuring solidity.

I glanced round, orientating myself almost at once. It had been some years since I'd last set foot in a Rhino, but the layout was almost the same as the ones I'd hitched a lift in from time to time during my brief period of attachment to the Reclaimers, apart from the fact that the benches were fixed at a more comfortable height for mere humans instead of the armour-clad giants of the Astartes. In their vehicles I'd always found my legs dangling in the manner of a child attempting to sit in an adult-sized chair, which had always left me feeling oddly self-conscious. The ceiling was as high as I remembered, though, with more headroom than I was used to in a Chimera, in order to accommodate the greater bulk of Astartes power armour. The only real difference I noticed was the weapon rack on the bulkhead dividing the crew and passenger compartments. Instead of bulky bolters, too heavy and ill balanced to be wielded effectively by anyone with muscles unaugmented by techno-sorcery, it held riot guns, tanglers, and stubbers.

'Are we taking the same route as before?' I asked, as we jerked into motion, and Nyte shook his head.

'The highway's still closed for repair.' He directed a wan smile at me. 'It seems we put quite a dent in it.' I nodded, realising he didn't want to mention Amberley's presence here in front of the common troopers, and probably his own people as well, come to that.

Kasteen nodded too. 'Commissar Cain's told us all about it,' she said, with just enough stress on the 'all' to settle any doubts he might have had as to whether I'd taken her into my confidence. Nyte inclined his head, taking her meaning at once, and Kasteen carried on with all the smooth assurance of a diplomat evading questions of policy. 'I'm glad to see you've recovered so quickly from your injuries.'

‘I’m well enough to carry out my duties for the arbitrator,’ Nyte assured her. Jurgen muttered something about data shuffling and watering the office plants, which I pretended not to have heard.

After a relatively short period of jolting around inside the APC, which was no more uncomfortable than most rides I’d had in one, and a considerable improvement on many (at least no one was shooting heavy ordnance at it) we came to a halt and the hatch clanged open. I followed Nyte and Kasteen outside, to be greeted by a somewhat windswept Lustig.

‘No sign of any trouble,’ he reported, saluting both me and the colonel in one fluid movement.

‘Best get your people together and go and find something to eat,’ I said. I suspected, rightly as it turned out, that the briefing was going to go on for some time. I glanced at Kasteen. ‘We should be safe enough in here.’

‘I imagine so,’ she replied, a trace of amusement flashing in her eyes.

We’d come to rest in an underground bunker, no doubt in the rock beneath the Arbites building, where a number of Rhinos like the one that had brought us here were parked. They looked blocky and functional in the harsh light of the luminators suspended from the ceiling, their weapon mounts gleaming where highlights were struck from them, and a couple were being fussed over by engineers. A thick adamantium blast door was sliding closed behind us, sealing the exit ramp. ‘I had no idea the local law enforcers were so well armed.’

‘This equipment belongs to the Arbites,’ Nyte informed us, leaving one of his subordinates to take care of Lustig and his troopers, and leading the way down a rockcrete-lined corridor behind a more conventionally sized door. ‘We’re only granted access to it in the event of a major civil emergency.’

‘I imagine the present situation more than qualifies,’ I said, and he nodded soberly.

‘I’m afraid it does.’ Anything more he might have been about to say would have to be kept to himself, however, as a cheerful voice hailed us from somewhere up ahead.

‘Ciaphas. You made it after all.’ Amberley was waiting beside a plain wooden door, which might have led anywhere. She was simply but strikingly dressed, in a mottled grey tabard over the sort of bodyglove I was more used to seeing on Arbites officers, although hers was a rich, deep red rather than midnight black. Her hair was drawn back into a ponytail with a ribbon of the same colour, which almost exactly matched the rubies set into

the eye sockets of the tiny skull in the centre of the stylised letter 'I' of the Inquisition sigil that hung around her neck, wrought in gold and no larger than my thumbnail. 'You look surprised to see me.'

'I am,' I admitted, 'and very pleasantly too,' which happened to be the truth, and her smile spread a little.

'You're a shameless flatterer,' she said, 'but thanks anyway.' She pushed the door open, and stepped through. 'I'm afraid we don't have much time to socialise, though.'

I followed, finding myself in a corridor almost ankle deep in carpet, lined with portraits I assumed depicted the luckless arbitrators previously assigned to this backwater world (unless they'd been shipped in as a job lot when Keesh or one of his predecessors took over the building). Tapestries depicting notable judicial decisions or quoting some fine point of law in High Gothic filled the spaces between, so that glancing back I was unable to tell where the service door by which we'd entered the public side of the building had been located. Amberley slowed her pace a little, to fall into step beside me, and took my arm.

'Nice work this morning,' she said. 'If that fuel barge had gone off it would have made things rather awkward.'

'It certainly would have been for us,' I said. Amberley shook her head, and her eyes clouded for a moment.

'I'm talking about the bigger picture. If things are as bad as we think they are, we're going to need Darien.' She squeezed my arm in a friendly fashion, and grinned again. 'Not to mention our assets there.' She nodded at Kasteen as she spoke, implying that she meant the regiment, but her eyes were resting on Jurgen, who was a pace or two behind me as usual. Noting that, I felt a faint, premonitory tingle in the palms of my hands as the thought occurred to me that there was a lot about this situation I still hadn't been told. But then that's what this briefing was supposed to be about.

Before I could formulate an adequate response we'd entered a wide lobby, and Amberley had paused before a pair of ornately carved double doors, from behind which I could hear a muted babble of conversation.

'Here we are,' she said, standing aside. She might have been about to say something more, but the vox-unit built into the pendant around her neck chimed softly, and a faint voice murmured something I couldn't quite catch. 'She's absolutely sure?' she asked, and listened again. 'I know, she's never exactly clear, but... I'll be right there.' She returned her gaze to me. 'I have

to go. Planet to save, you know how it is.'

'Aren't you staying for the briefing?' I asked, bemused.

Amberley shook her head, with a trace of amusement. 'My presence here's a secret, remember? I'm not about to stand up on a stage in front of half the planet.' She shot a dazzling smile at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. 'Don't tell anyone I was around; I'd hate to have to kill you.'

'I'd prefer it if you didn't have to as well,' I assured her, trying to sound as if I was joking, and not entirely sure that neither of us was.

'I'll try and catch you afterwards,' Amberley said, hesitating on the verge of turning to go, 'and if I can't, I'll be in touch as soon as I can. You'll understand a lot more when you've heard what Keesh has to say.'

'I'll look forward to it,' I said, and reached out a hand to open the door.

'This is as far as we go,' Nyte said, stepping forward hastily to bar Jurgen's progress. 'The briefing's restricted to personnel of command rank only.' Jurgen's habitual expression of placid imbecility began to harden into the mask of obstinacy that had kept admirals and generals on hold until I could be bothered to deal with them, and he gave Nyte a withering look.

'I go with the commissar unless he tells me otherwise.' Conscious of the barely-concealed smirk on Amberley's face, I nodded judiciously.

'Technically you're right, of course,' I told Nyte. 'Jurgen's military rank is too low to permit him to accompany me.' In actual fact it was about as low as it was possible to get and still consider him a Guardsman rather than a piece of ancillary equipment, but that was beside the point. 'However, since he's here as my aide, he's a representative of the Commissariat rather than the Imperial Guard, which means he has *carte blanche* to go anywhere his duties demand. Is that not the case, inquisitor?'

'Indubitably,' Amberley agreed, keeping a straight face with some difficulty.

'I see.' Nyte coloured a little, no doubt regretting having started this conversation in the first place. 'I'll leave you to it, then.' He disappeared down the corridor, and Jurgen looked at me placidly, all trace of truculence gone.

'Anything I can do for you, commissar?'

I shook my head. 'Nothing springs to mind,' I admitted.

'Very good, sir.' He commandeered one of the sofas scattered around the place with a sigh of satisfaction, and fished a thermal flask of tanna and a porno slate out of his collection of pouches. 'I'll wait for you here then,

shall I?’

‘That’s probably best,’ I conceded. After all, he’d had a busy day of it so far, so he might as well put his feet up while he could. Suppressing a twinge of envy, I turned to Kasteen, and gestured towards the door. ‘Shall we?’

‘By all means.’

I swung it open, with a last regretful look at Amberley’s departing derriere, and we stepped through together.

The noise was the first thing to register, a babble of overlapping voices that echoed from the domed ceiling overhead, and then my eyes caught up with my ears. We were in a large amphitheatre, tiers of well-padded seats falling away to a podium on which Keesh was already seated, chatting to the unmistakable figure of Lord General Zyvan, the military leader of our little expeditionary force. He clearly remembered me from Gravalax. Glancing up, he made eye contact briefly, and inclined his head in greeting. Of course this just drew everyone else’s attention to us, and several scores of heads turned in our direction, the ambient noise dropping off considerably as the assembled notables registered the presence of the hero of the hour. I glanced around, looking for somewhere to sit, while every eye in the room swivelled in my direction.

‘Commissar,’ Zyvan said, a friendly smile elbowing its way past his neatly clipped beard. ‘A pleasure to see you again.’ He nodded to Kasteen. ‘And you too, of course, colonel.’

Suddenly aware that we were the only two people in the room still standing, Kasteen nodded formally. ‘My lord general,’ she said, her search for a seat becoming as unobtrusively urgent as my own.

‘Allow me.’ A nearby tech-priest budged up a little, making room for the two of us, and Kasteen and I slipped onto the bench beside him gratefully. His robe concealed a few odd, solid protrusions, which nudged me uncomfortably from time to time, but at least I wasn’t standing there like a practice target on the firing range any more. His lower jaw had been replaced with metal, a grille of fine mesh where his mouth should have been, but in spite of being unable to smile he nodded a greeting, which seemed sincere enough, and his vocoder unit managed to inject an affable tone into his speech. ‘Magos Lazurus, at your service.’

‘Commissar Cain,’ I replied, as if he hadn’t already known, and indicated my companion. ‘And Colonel Kasteen, of the 597th Valhallan.’

‘Your reputation precedes you, commissar,’ Lazurus said, with a trace of

amusement. Reminded of the necessity of reinforcing it while I was still the centre of attention, I caught Zyvan's eye again.

'My apologies for delaying you all,' I said, projecting my voice clearly through the now muted hum of conversation the way I'd been taught to as a callow young cadet. 'I'm afraid our pilot was unable to depart on schedule.'

'That was quite fortunate for us, it seems,' Zyvan accepted the apology with the good grace I'd expected, then to my surprise smiled at me. 'Perhaps you'd be kind enough to fill in the details for me over dinner before you leave.'

'It would be my pleasure,' I assured him, having no doubt that his personal chef would be far more creative than the cooks of the 597th.

'If there are no more late arrivals expected, perhaps we can begin,' Keesh said, scanning the room, and Zyvan nodded his agreement.

'Seal the chamber,' he said, and a squad of his personal guards took up positions around the theatre, covering the exits, their hellguns ready for use.

As they moved up the aisles, I took the opportunity to scan the people present, surprised a little by their diversity. There were plenty of Guard uniforms, of course, the colonels of every regiment currently on Periremunda, some of them accompanied by a selection of their senior officers, and almost all with their commissars in tow. I recognised a few familiar faces from other wars, but most were strangers to me. Apart from Lazurus there were few tech adepts to be seen, but those that were here seemed clustered around him, as though they were part of the same party.

After the doubts Keesh had expressed about the loyalty of the PDF I wasn't surprised to find them conspicuous by their absence, but one local institution seemed to have been taken into the Arbitrator's trust. Down by the podium, watching him and Zyvan intently from the front row, was a small knot of figures in bright silver power armour, the black surplices wrapped around them broken only by the image of a single white rose.

'Battle-sisters,' Kasteen said, her voice taking on a tinge of awe.

I nodded. 'I suppose if any planetary force can be considered uncompromised by the 'stealers it would be them,' I conceded. After all, they were hardly likely to pass on the taint even if they were infected, and in the atmosphere of Emperor-bothering piety in which they lived I doubted that anyone touched by the xenos would escape detection for long.

'By the Emperor's grace,' Kasteen said, and I nodded again, rather less happy to see them than the colonel evidently was. I'd seen the Sororitas let

loose on the battlefield before, and as I've said, they've always struck me as something of a blunt instrument tactically speaking, whereas what I thought we needed now was subtlety. Of course that opinion was about to change markedly, but I had no inkling of that at the time.

'As most of you have already been informed,' Zyvan said, while a hololith flickered erratically into life, projecting a map of the subsector above his head, 'we've received a message from Coronus. A further two divisions of the Imperial Guard have been successfully mustered and are expected in system in a little over a week, along with a reinforced battlegroup from the sector fleet, if the warp currents remain favourable.'

'Praise the Emperor for His deliverance,' the woman in the most garishly decorated set of power armour said, and the others made the sign of the aquila at the sound of the holy name.

Zyvan nodded curtly. 'Indeed. However, we haven't been delivered yet. The hive fleet is also inbound, and as near as we can estimate its location from the warp shadow our astropaths have detected, is somewhere around here.' A vague blob appeared, swallowing a large chunk of space. 'As you can clearly see, depending on where in the shadow the bulk of the tyranid fleet actually is, it could arrive anything up to a week before our reinforcements, or a fortnight afterwards. There's simply no way of telling which until they get here.'

A ripple of unease began to slosh around the room, and I thought it was time to remind people what a hero I was supposed to be again.

'I've faced tyranids before,' I said, 'and so has the colonel here. They're formidable enough, I grant you, but we're both living proof that they can be beaten.'

'Well said.' Zyvan looked at me with something like approval. 'But there's an additional complication to take into account.'

'The 'stealer cults,' I said, nodding. 'We need to purge the PDF before the 'nids get here, so we can throw them into the fight with confidence.'

'We're doing all we can to speed up the process,' Keesh assured us, 'but that in itself has revealed a new problem.' Something about the way he spoke started the palms of my hands itching again, and I simply nodded, waiting for him to continue, unsure of whether I could trust my voice not to betray my sudden rush of apprehension.

'Quite so,' Zyvan said. His steely gaze swept the room, the force of his personality washing over everyone in turn. 'What you are about to hear is

highly sensitive. It's no exaggeration to say that the survival of this world may depend on your discretion.'

Better and better, I thought. I already had some inkling of Zyvan's flair for the dramatic, a trait I was to grow a great deal better acquainted with in the years to come, but something about his body language told me that in this instance he meant every word of it. He nodded to Keesh.

'Last night we uncovered a brood of hybrids, which had successfully infiltrated the System Defence Force,' the arbitrator began without preamble. 'The purge is still continuing, but among the facilities compromised was this one.' The hololith flickered, and began projecting a wobbly image of the Periremunda system, one of the outer orbitals highlighted in red.

'Argus five orbital,' Zyvan put in helpfully. 'One of the eight aether platforms making up the system-wide auspex net.'

'Exactly,' Keesh said, returning to his theme. 'Of course the moment we realised so sensitive an installation had been under the control of the enemy we began an immediate review of the datalogs. The results of which were disturbing, to say the least.'

'Disturbing how?' the woman in the gaudy armour put in again, the unspoken 'get on with it' resonating around the room. Despite its source, it was a sentiment I felt myself warming to. Whatever the arbitrator was leading up to it was nothing good, of that I was certain, and I felt an intense desire to hear the worst and at least get it over with.

'Canoness Eglantine.' Keesh nodded, acknowledging her presence with a weariness that hinted heavily that they'd met before and seldom saw eye to eye, which I suppose was hardly surprising: the law dealt in hard evidence, the Ecclesiarchy in matters of faith, and the common ground between the two was generally pretty narrow. 'You have something to add?'

'Merely that a true servant of the Emperor should feel no disquiet, however dire the news,' the woman said. 'He protects.' She bowed her head, and the rest of her entourage did the same. Before they could turn the whole thing into a prayer meeting, Keesh got to the point, which was probably what Eglantine had intended all along.

'The datalogs had been tampered with,' he said, 'to conceal the fact that the machine spirits of the auspexes had been blinded across a narrow arc of the entire system.'

Something which might have been a sharp intake of breath rattled the

chest of the tech-priest next to me, the thought of the blasphemous desecration wrought on the cogitators of the Argus station clearly distressing to him. The hololith changed again, a thin violet funnel appearing like a scratch across the face of the Periremunda system, linking the planet to its outer reaches. With grim inevitability the image in the hololith began to shrink, Periremunda, her sun, and the other planets and habitats dwindling to a single point as though floating in bathwater being sucked down a drainage pipe.

‘The area of darkness only extended as far as the halo,’³⁵ Zyvan said, ‘but our tech adepts and Navigators were able to extrapolate the line it drew beyond the limits of the auspex web.’ With a grim sense of inevitability I watched the image continuing to shrink until the previous view of the subsector had been restored. As I’d known it would, the thin violet line extended several parsecs from Periremunda, finally vanishing into the ominous shadow surrounding the tyranid hive fleet.

‘How long ago was this treason committed?’ I asked, impatient to hear the worst. Keesh looked directly at me, his manner as serious as I’d ever seen it.

‘The records were tampered with on 847 932,’ he said heavily. I began to calculate the amount of time that had elapsed, a chill of apprehension shivering down my back, but before I could reach an answer Keesh saved me the bother. ‘So it seems highly probable that something from the hive fleet landed undetected around six months ago. The tyranids aren’t just coming, ladies and gentlemen. They’re already here.’



TEN

Well, that got everyone's attention, you can be sure, the ensuing clamour at least giving me time to mask my own terror. This was far worse news than even the most pessimistic scenario Kasteen and I had been able to imagine during our chilly wait at the aerodrome back in Darien.

The colonel looked at me, her lips tight. 'This is going to affect our strategy,' she said, with commendable understatement. 'We've been working on the assumption that we'll be dealing with an invasion from space. If the 'nids are already on the ground, we're going to have to fortify in depth.'

'Once we know where they're coming from,' I agreed. If they were already on Hoarfell, the scout creatures could be lurking anywhere. Deception and camouflage were what they were bred for. There was a slim chance that we might be able to deduce their presence, though, if only by inference. 'As soon as we get back, we'll need access to all the PDF and justicar files on Hoarfell for the last six months. Missing persons, auspex glitches, friend of a friend tales, anything odd or suspicious.'

Kasteen nodded. 'If we can trust the files,' she said, raising the old question of how much we could rely on institutions that might well have been infiltrated by the 'stealer cults.

'For now we're going to have to,' I said. 'They're all we've got.'

Kasteen nodded again, looking far from happy. 'I'll get Ruput on it as soon as I can get a message out,' she said. Contacting Broklaw now would be impossible, the security measures Keesh had put in place for this meeting effectively blocking any outgoing vox transmissions.

'Good,' I said, and raised my voice over the babble of sound. 'If I might ask a question?'

As so often in these cases, one man sounding as if he knew what he was doing was sufficient to make everyone else take a deep breath, at least metaphorically speaking, and start to calm down. The fact that in this case it was backed up by my fraudulent reputation for remaining calm and decisive in a crisis probably didn't hurt either.

'By all means, commissar,' Keesh said, his tone relieved, although whether this was due to the fact that everyone was starting to attend to the matter at hand again, or that I seemed to have forestalled the Sororitas delegation from launching into the second verse of *He Clasps Us to His Bosom Bright*,³⁶ I couldn't be sure.

Conscious that, once again, I was the centre of attention, I affected an air of unassuming modesty. 'Has any trace of a tyrannid vanguard actually been detected on any of the plateaux?' Amberley's words about needing Darien were coming back to me, and from a tactical viewpoint they only made sense if other plateaux with star port facilities were felt to be under greater threat. After all, with two divisions of Imperial Guard in the warp, we'd need somewhere to offload them when they arrived.

'No,' Keesh admitted, his evident relief at the answer spreading little ripples of reassurance around the auditorium. 'That at least indicates that whatever infiltration there has been, it's on a small scale.'

'How can you be so sure?' Eglantine asked, a trace of asperity in her voice, as though one of her novices had failed to memorise some cherished piece of dogma correctly. Keesh looked at her almost pityingly.

'Because of the unique geography of this planet, your devoutness. The habitable surface of Periremunda is a minute fraction of the whole, and for the most part densely populated. If an infiltrating force has made it down, it must be small enough to evade detection under such conditions, or isolated on one of the lesser plateaux, and effectively trapped there. The lord general and I incline to the former view, and anticipate little difficulty in dealing with them once they reveal themselves.'

Eglantine looked less than convinced. 'If they landed on any of the plateaux at all,' she pointed out. 'Most of the planet is wilderness. If they came down in the desert, they could be anywhere.'

'If they came down in the desert they'll be dead,' Keesh assured her. Having seen how tough the chitinous horrors could be I wasn't quite so sure about that myself, and from his dubious expression it seemed that Zyvan shared my opinion.

‘Nevertheless,’ I interjected, ‘a thorough orbital scan to make sure couldn’t hurt. Perhaps our ships in orbit could do the job?’

‘They already are,’ Zyvan assured me, with an approving nod. ‘So far they’ve found nothing, although much of the lower depths are hard to get an accurate auspex image from.’ Remembering the vast sandstorm I’d flown over on my first visit to Principia Mons, I nodded. Anything could be hiding under that, or the smoke from the equatorial volcanoes. Nevertheless, the fact that they’d failed to find the scuttling horde we all dreaded offered at least a crumb of reassurance.

Now their minds had been relieved of the prospect of being engulfed under a tidal wave of chitin the moment we set foot outside the auditorium, everyone’s attention returned to the more mundane matters of tactical disposition. This basically boiled down to all the regimental commanders being given a free hand to secure their assigned plateau in whatever manner they saw fit, contingency plans for evacuating the bulk of the civilian population to peaks defended by the Guard if the hive fleet arrived or the putative infiltrating force showed their hand (or talons, or rending claws) before our reinforcements showed up, and a progress report from Keesh on the painfully slow process of identifying which PDF units were definitely free of the ‘stealer taint and could be relied on to fight without having someone looking over their shoulder ready to call down an artillery barrage at the first sign of treachery. The number above suspicion was still depressingly low, and it seemed all too probable that we’d be forced to rely to an unsettling extent on the units in the next most trusted category, which Keesh had rated as no more than reasonably reliable. It was when the hololith displayed this second, much larger, list that Eglantine interrupted once again.

‘This is tantamount to questioning the loyalty of my own sisterhood!’ she declaimed, with a fine ear for the dramatic. It seemed she’d spotted the name of the Gavarrone Militia, the PDF unit based on the plateau where the Order of the White Rose had its convent, and since Gavarrone was an Ecclesiarchy fiefdom technically independent of the planetary government, subject only to canon law, had chosen to interpret the fact as a thinly-veiled attempt to call into question the loyalty of the church itself.

To be honest I’ve no doubt that Keesh had relished the chance to get a little dig in at his rival in the never-ending squabble between church and state, but under the circumstances he was too sensible to make an issue of

it, merely bowing to the furious canoness.

‘I’m sure no one here would wish to do such a thing,’ he assured her, his voice studiously neutral. ‘If your faith in the men of the Gavarronian PDF is as strong as it is in your battle-sisters, then you may deploy them as readily as you see fit.’

Unable to pass back the buck Keesh had so neatly dropped in her lap without tacitly endorsing the doubts she’d objected to, Eglantine nodded tightly. ‘We prevail by the grace of the Emperor,’ she said.

‘Then our victory is assured,’ Keesh said blandly, twisting the knife, and the meeting dragged on into the late afternoon.

All dull things come to an end, thankfully, and at long last Keesh and Zyvan bade us farewell, a few final words about the need for absolute secrecy still ringing in our ears. Truth to tell there was little need for this, as I don’t think anyone present was unaware of the consequences if word of the tyrannid menace were to leak out to the civilian population before all our preparations were in place. They were spooked enough already at the notion of traitors and heretics running around detonating random bits of the landscape, and if they got even an inkling of the real threat hanging over their home world the panic and civil disorder would be all but impossible to contain.

I regained the relatively fresh air of the lobby gratefully, my head throbbing with boredom and fatigue, and glanced around for Jurgen, but he seemed to have vanished completely, leaving only the faintest reminder of his presence floating in the air around the sofa he’d occupied. There was a little more solid evidence that he’d been there as well: a tray containing a delicate porcelain tannapot and bowl, both empty, and a matching plate decorated with the squashed remains of what had possibly once been an ackenberry éclair. A cordon of crumbs and less identifiable detritus enclosed the space where his feet would have been.

‘Commissar?’ Lazurus was standing next to my shoulder, something under his robe humming faintly. ‘Is something troubling you?’

‘Not really,’ I said, masking my irritation as best I could. The sight of the remains of Jurgen’s impromptu picnic had reminded me of how hungry I was getting. Where he’d found it I had no idea, and knew better than to ask. ‘I was just wondering where my aide had got to.’

‘I’m sure he’ll turn up,’ Lazurus said blandly, his voice dropping to a level

where no one else around us could hear it. ‘Inquisitor Vail seems to have considerable faith in your ability to find that which is lost.’ He studied my face for a reaction, which I like to think I was too practiced to give him, despite the sudden shock of hearing Amberley’s name on the lips of a stranger (which he didn’t actually have, as I’ve already mentioned, but you know what I mean).

‘We were lucky on Gravalax,’ I said, as blandly as I could, too experienced a dissembler to take refuge in an easily challenged lie. He was evidently aware that Amberley and I knew one another, if nothing else, and could easily have been fishing if he only suspected her presence here. Obviously knowing how the game was played, Lazurus nodded affably.

‘So I heard. Good luck with finding your minion.’ He began to turn away, then, as I’d half-expected, being no stranger to the use of that particular technique myself, glanced back as if with an afterthought. ‘Oh, that reminds me. Any promising leads on Metheius yet?’ Of course I hadn’t a clue who he was talking about, but I was just tired and hungry enough not to be able to resist the urge to tease him a little.

‘Nothing concrete,’ I said, with just enough hesitation to make him think I was holding out, and he nodded again, as though I’d confirmed something.

‘Of course. You’ll need to talk to the inquisitor first.’ He nodded affably again, and made the sign of the cogwheel. ‘May the Omnissiah regulate your systems.’

‘And yours,’ I said blandly, wondering what else Amberley hadn’t been telling me.

‘Looks like you’ve made a friend,’ Kasteen said, moving a little closer now that the tech-priest had gone. For some reason cogboys always gave her the creeps, even our own engineers, although she could conceal it well enough if she had to. That didn’t mean she had to like being around them, though, and she tended to find something else to concentrate on in their presence if she could. While I’d been having my bizarre *tête-à-tête* with Lazurus she’d been chatting to her opposite number from one of the Harrakoni regiments, and perhaps fortunately had missed the entire exchange.

‘Possibly,’ I said, a little guardedly, and glanced around for Jurgen again. The crowd in the lobby area was beginning to thin out, and wide gaps were beginning to appear between the bodies, but still no sign of my errant aide. I turned my head, catching sight of a flicker of movement in the corner of my

eye, but when I looked in that direction I could see nothing there. The last of the Imperial Guard contingent moved away, standing aside to make room for Eglantine and her escort, leaving Kasteen and me to our own devices. 'You'd better go on ahead. I'll catch up when I've found him.'

'Right.' Kasteen nodded briskly, conscious as I was of the need to get things moving back on Hoarfell as quickly as possible, and disappeared down the corridor, tapping her comm-bead. 'Lustig, we're moving out. I want a vox-relay to Major Broklaw as soon as we're clear of the damping field.' Left on my own I sighed with impatience, and glanced around, hoping to find some clue as to Jurgen's whereabouts. He couldn't have gone far, the tannapot was still warm.

That simple little piece of deduction saved my life. As I inclined my head and bent forward at the waist to reach out and touch the piece of porcelain I became aware once more of that flicker of motion in my peripheral vision, and a chill breeze flashed past my cheek. That was a sensation I was all too familiar with, an edged weapon of some kind striking a great deal too close for comfort, and I drew my chainsword by reflex, flourishing it around me in a defensive pattern I'd practised so often it went beyond conscious thought. Whirling round, looking for a target, I found myself facing an empty room.

My mouth went dry, and on the back of my tongue I could suddenly taste the ozone crackle of sorcery. I'd faced psykers before, of course, but almost always in the company of Jurgen, and I fought down a rising tide of panic. Pushing it away into a corner of my hindbrain, where it could usefully speed my reflexes without getting in the way of my prospects for survival, I scanned the room, looking for that telltale blur of motion again.

I caught it flickering in my peripheral vision in the nick of time, and blocked instinctively, feeling rather than seeing the blow, and was rewarded with the unmistakable whine of diamond-hard teeth slicing into steel.

'Frot!' said a voice close to my ear, an edge of aggrieved surprise in it, and I cut at the source of the sound, but of course my invisible assailant had the advantage of being able to see the humming weapon in my hand, and evaded it easily.

'Jurgen! Kasteen!' I bawled. 'Get back here!' but static hissed in my comm-bead, blotting out everything else. It seemed that the psyker, whoever he was, had the eldritch ability to block communications as well as my senses.³⁷

‘You’re on your own, hero,’ the voice taunted me, and I flicked through a guard position purely by instinct, being rewarded again with another jolting impact as I deflected a strike no more effective than the previous one had been. ‘Oh, very good, or very lucky.’ The voice had the whining timbre of someone insignificant and ineffectual who finally gets the chance to pick on someone they think is even weaker, and the sudden surge of anger that accompanied that realisation was strong enough to drive out most of the fear I felt. After all the monstrous foes I’d faced and bested, I wasn’t about to be beaten by some pathetic nonentity.

‘I’ve fought daemons and real witches,’ I said, keeping my voice light and easy. ‘A three-for-a-credit psyker’s not much of a challenge.’ You might think goading the fellow was hardly sensible, but under the circumstances I thought I didn’t have a lot to lose. Sooner or later he’d manage to get past my guard, and the best chance I had was to keep him off-balance and hope he’d make a mistake, with any luck one that revealed his precise whereabouts long enough for me to cut the legs out from under him.

‘I’m powerful enough to gut you!’ Well, the getting him angry part of the plan appeared to be working. His voice rose in a petulant whinny, and a nearby armchair rocked a little as something banged into it. I struck out instantly, releasing a cloud of stuffing as my shrieking chainblade sliced through the grox hide upholstery, and was rewarded with a muffled curse. I could only just have missed him.

Stepping into the gap, following up my advantage by instinct, I suddenly found the flickering outline of a human figure solidifying like mist in front of me, wavering in and out of visibility like a badly-tuned hololith. There was an abrupt crash somewhere behind me as something ceramic shattered with an unmistakably expensive sound, and a familiar and surprisingly welcome odour filled the room.

‘Hold on, commissar! I’m coming!’ Jurgen bellowed, but the mere fact of his arrival was enough. Abruptly the ozone tang of sorcery was gone, replaced by the reassuring blend of old socks and flatulence, and a weaselly little fellow, waving a wickedly-serrated combat blade as though he barely knew which end to point forwards, was standing in front of me, his eyes wide with shock.

‘What did you...’ he began, in tones of outrage, before my gently humming blade detached his head from his shoulders. He continued to stare at me for another instant, trying to comprehend his own death, until the

pressure of his heartbeat pushed a fountain of blood through his neck and sent his head bouncing into a corner.

‘Where were you, Jurgen?’ I asked, trying to sound calm as I cleaned and resheathed the blade that had just saved my life yet again.

My aide shrugged, and indicated a tray on the floor, which contained the shattered remains of a tanna service not unlike the one he’d been using, and a spilled mound of sandwiches. ‘I saw the guards on the door standing aside to let everyone leave, so I went to get you and the colonel some refreshment. I thought you could do with it after all that talking.’ He contemplated the wreckage of his errand for a moment, and re-slung the lasgun he’d readied across his shoulder. ‘I’d better go and get you some more.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, more by reflex than because I wanted the tanna, and turned to join him. ‘I’ll come with you and save you the trouble.’ There didn’t seem much likelihood of another unnatural assassin lurking in the vicinity, or they would have attacked me together, but I wasn’t in the mood to take any more chances than I had to.

‘Commissar?’ Lord General Zyvan was emerging from the auditorium, Keesh at his shoulder, and a squad of his personal guard levelling their hellguns as they took in the unexpected vista of carnage. He glanced at the dead psyker, and raised an eyebrow. ‘I can see our dinner conversation is going to be even more interesting than I’d anticipated.’



ELEVEN

‘It seems whoever was trying to kill you, he wasn’t a hybrid,’ Zyvan said, handing the data-slate he’d been glancing at across the table to me. The aide who’d delivered it bowed formally and disappeared again, leaving us to our recaf. The dinner preceding it had more than lived up to my expectations, and although I was to become a great deal better acquainted with the genius of Zyvan’s personal chef in the years to come, up until that point I’d seldom tasted anything to compare with it.

The lord general had proven to be an affable and engaging host, which reinforced the positive impression I’d already formed of him after our initial meeting on Gravalax. All in all I’d found myself enjoying a remarkably pleasant evening, one that had improved even more after Amberley joined us. Her appearance halfway through the first course, with polite but guarded apologies about having been unavoidably detained, had come as a most pleasant surprise, and the enthusiasm with which she began making up for lost time as soon as she got hold of a fork hinted that whatever she’d been called away to do earlier in the day had proven to be somewhat strenuous. She didn’t volunteer the information, and I knew better than to ask, as did Zyvan, of course, unless he knew already.³⁸

Both had listened to my account of the day’s activities with every sign of interest, interrupting only to ask pertinent questions or for someone to pass the condiments. I’d started with the incident at Darien aerodrome, resisting the temptation to embroider things, because I knew from long experience that the more matter-of-fact I sounded about my supposed heroism the greater the credit tended to snowball.

‘Keesh’s people are following up on the crew of the dirigible,’ Amberley said through a mouthful of sautéed grox heart. ‘Several key workers in the

transport company have already disappeared, which seems significant, but no one they've netted so far seems tainted with the 'stealer genes.'

'So at least they won't be trying that again,' I said, more in hope than expectation, and to my relief Amberley nodded.

'Keesh is stepping up security checks on all commercial air crews, so no one flies from now on without a gene scan.' She ladled a spoonful of grated radish onto the fragrant offal filling her plate. 'I must say he seems pretty efficient for an arbitrator assigned to a backwater dirtball like Periremunda.'

'Maybe he annoyed the wrong people,' I said. It happens in every branch of the Imperial service, able and ambitious individuals getting sidelined by the nervous incompetents above them, or just backing the wrong side in the endless round of internal politics and getting their careers derailed as a result. Whereas I, who would have liked nothing more than to sit out my years of service in a pointless sinecure as far from harm's way as possible, kept getting entirely the opposite. That just goes to prove what I've always suspected: the Emperor has a nasty sense of humour.

'Either way, it's been good luck for us,' Zyvan said. He'd invited Keesh to join us as well, but the arbitrator had declined, preferring to follow up on our mysterious psyker as quickly as possible before the trail went cold. I hadn't been all that surprised when his preliminary report arrived, and our would-be assassin turned out to be fully human (in so far as the phrase can ever be applied to someone touched by the warp, of course). None of the 'stealer spawn I'd encountered previously had shown any talent for warpcraft, and I mentioned as much.

'It's never been documented,' Amberley agreed, which is as close as an inquisitor will ever get to dismissing something as impossible.

'That raises the question of where the fellow came from,' Zyvan pointed out, with a fastidious sip of his recaf, 'and why he was so determined to kill the commissar.' I nodded in agreement.

'I was wondering about that myself,' I said. 'I would have thought you or Keesh would have been the obvious targets.'

'Then I take it you haven't seen a pictcast lately,' Amberley said dryly. I hadn't, of course, taking no more interest in the mundane gossip of the indigenous civilians here than I had on any of the other planets I'd visited, and the attractive inquisitor lost no time in filling me in, amusement sparkling as always in the depths of her eyes. 'The newsbands are full of you, and so are the printsheets. So far as the Periremundan in the street

goes, you're the public face of the Imperial Guard here.'

'I see,' I said slowly, taking a sip of the bitter liquid in my cup, and feeling as though I'd suddenly sprouted a target icon between my shoulder blades. In my experience civilians had only the sketchiest idea of how the military actually functioned, and it seemed horribly feasible that some halfwit insurrectionist would think removing me from the equation would somehow undermine our ability to fight them.³⁹ That brought me right back to the most fundamental question. 'So who was he, and who could have sent him?'

'Well, he was evidently a psyker,' Amberley said, 'and a relatively weak one at that.' I nodded, trying to look as though I was keeping up, and fortunately Zyvan asked the obvious question before I could.

'How do you know he was weak?' He glanced at the data-slate again. 'According to the autopsy he was at least forty years old, possibly close to fifty. He must have successfully concealed his curse for decades, or he would have been picked up by a black ship long ago.' I nodded too. According to the received wisdom, the taint of the warp usually appeared with the onset of puberty, and I mentioned as much.

'That's generally true,' Amberley admitted, 'but there are exceptions.' She shrugged, her pale yellow gown slipping across her skin in a fashion that distracted me very pleasantly for a moment or two. 'You'd have to ask someone in the Malleus or Hereticus about that, though, rogue psykers are their department. But I do know enough about them to recognise a witch who can't really control his powers.' She nodded at me. 'You kept seeing flickers of movement in his general vicinity, you said.'

'That's right.' It had all been in my original account of the incident, and managed to explain away how I'd been able to bisect the bastard without revealing Jurgen's extraordinary gift. So far as Keesh and Zyvan knew, I'd just got lucky with a speculative swipe. 'And I kept him talking, which helped me get an idea of where he was.'

'Exactly.' Amberley nodded again. 'If he was used to his powers he would have kept quiet, maximising his advantage, and he would have learned how to move without revealing his position. The reason you kept getting glimpses of him out of the corner of your eye was because he was too excited to concentrate on keeping whatever aura he was projecting around himself whole.'

'That makes sense,' I said. 'Sort of. Which leaves us with a nameless

nobody who suddenly discovers he's a psyker and sets out to kill a man he's only ever seen on the pict. What are the chances of that?'

'Not high, I would say.' Zyvan placed his empty recaf cup down on the table, and began to pass round a decanter of amasec at least equal to anything in Keesh's collection. 'I'll ask the arbitrator if there are any Chaos cults active on Periremunda. Wherever there are witches...'

'A good point,' I said, having come to much the same conclusion myself. We both looked at Amberley, who shrugged again, with the same pleasing effect as the last time.

'There's bound to be at least one,' she said, in a casual tone that I for one found vaguely disturbing. 'Probably several.' All right, her branch of the Inquisition was meant to deal with alien threats, like the one facing us at the moment, but I would have expected her to be a little more concerned at the possibility of a bunch of heretics running around the place performing their blasphemous rituals and summoning who knew what horrors from the warp. Something of what I was thinking obviously showed on my face, because Amberley smiled at me. 'Most so-called cultists have no idea of the true nature of Chaos. They band together more because they feel alienated from society than because they really want to bring down the Ruinous Powers on the galaxy.' Her eyes grew hard for a moment. 'There are exceptions, of course.'⁴⁰

'And you think one of the exceptions is active on Periremunda?' I asked.

Amberley shook her head. 'I doubt it. We'd have found traces of them before now. But it's perfectly possible that one of the less dangerous groups is entrenched here. Even if all they do is enact a few meaningless rituals they've picked up from horror pict, they'd be a natural refuge for any rogue psykers on the planet. People like our anonymous friend here.' She glanced in the direction of the slate. My would-be killer had been carrying no identification, and had been dressed in the sort of gaudy clown costume that anywhere else would have made him stand out like an ork in a ballet dress, but which the Periremundans seemed to think was bordering on the conservative. No doubt Keesh would find out who he was in the end, but by that time his associates would probably be long gone.

'So in your considered opinion,' Zyvan said slowly, trying to digest the new and unwelcome information Amberley had just presented us with, 'whatever group this man belonged to is no real threat to our operation here?'

Amberley rolled her eyes despairingly, and sighed. 'Of course they're a threat, they're Chaos-worshipping loonies. Just a great deal less of one at the moment than the hive fleet, which is poised to devour every living thing on the planet.' She sipped at her amasec. 'Once we've dealt with the immediate problem, we can worry about the little things.' I was by no means reassured to hear a Chaos cult, even one an inquisitor seemed to consider relatively ineffectual, being referred to as a little thing, but I took her point.

'Let's look on the bright side,' I said. 'Maybe the 'nids will eat them all for us.' Amberley laughed mellifluously.

'Maybe they will,' she said.

'The thing I don't understand,' Zyvan said, glancing at the slate again, 'is why they'd reveal themselves now. He must have known there was a chance he'd get caught.'

'He probably wasn't the most rational person on the planet,' I said, thinking of Rakel, and most of the other psykers I'd ever met, 'and he thought he was undetectable, remember. He probably thought he'd be able to stroll into the Arbites building, carry out his assignment...' for some reason I found myself reluctant to use the phrase 'kill me', as it reminded me a little too forcefully of how close he'd come to succeeding, 'and walk straight out again. If he'd managed to pull it off the insurgents would have got the blame, and no one would even have suspected the existence of his cult.'

'That's what I mean,' Zyvan said. 'If they hadn't shown their hand this afternoon, we still wouldn't know they were there. Why bother?'

'We've been lifting a lot of stones looking for the 'stealer broods,' I pointed out. 'Maybe they were just afraid that we'd start pulling their people in as well, and get on to them that way. So they panicked, and thought they'd disrupt the counter-insurgency effort before we stumbled across them by accident.'

'That sounds plausible,' Zyvan said. Well it was no more irrational than anything else I'd seen the minions of Chaos do over the years, and I couldn't think of any other explanation, so I just nodded and let it go.

The rest of the evening passed in a pleasant haze of small talk, a regicide game with Zyvan (which I won quite comfortably, despite Amberley leaning over my shoulder suggesting alternative moves every five minutes), and enough of the lord general's excellent amasec to reinforce the mood of

light-hearted merriment despite the terrible danger hanging over us. All in all it had been a long time since I'd felt quite so relaxed, despite the rigours of the day, and Zyvan clearly felt the same. From then on I was to receive periodic invitations to dine with him whenever our respective duties permitted.

At length, however, the evening wore itself out, and I offered to escort Amberley back to her hotel suite. Not that she required escorting, of course, being perfectly capable of decking an ork if she had to, but it was the polite thing to do, and it would enable me to spend a little more time in her company. After a moment's consideration she nodded, smiling.

'That would be nice,' she agreed.

Zyvan had set up his headquarters in the Arbites building, more for the security it offered than from any other consideration I suspected, and Amberley led me through a twisting maze of utility corridors until we found ourselves back in the underground chamber our Rhino had come to rest in a few hours before. A gleaming speeder the size of a limousine was parked there now, its windows blacked out, hovering a couple of centimetres above the stained rockcrete floor with its grav units humming faintly.

'Very nice,' I said, taking in the thing's sleek lines and air of barely restrained power. I wasn't terribly *au fait* with civilian vehicles, but I doubted anything that efficient and expensive-looking had originated on Periremunda.⁴¹

As we approached it the door hissed open, and Pelton grinned out at us, a chauffeur's cap perched incongruously on his mop of wheat-coloured hair. 'Home, milady?' he asked, playing the part about as convincingly as a marionette, and Amberley nodded, sliding across a rear seat almost as wide and well padded as the one I'd occupied in Keesh's mangled limousine.

'Home, Pelton.' She glanced up at me. 'Coming?'

'Of course.' I masked my surprise with the ease of long practice, and clambered in beside her. I raised an eyebrow as the rear door hissed closed. 'Milady?'

Amberley nodded, as Pelton fed power to the motivators, and the long, sleek vehicle began to move, turning on the spot as it rose to about a metre above the floor and humming towards the blast door. 'I'm travelling as the Lady haut Vail, minor aristocracy from the Krytenward system. It explains the servants and other riff-raff hanging around my suite.' The last sentence

was delivered in the bored drawl of the nobility, and Pelton grinned again, apparently enjoying the joke.

‘That’s us,’ he explained, in case I hadn’t got it, and returned his attention to the controls. ‘Whoops, didn’t see that coming.’ He kicked a little more power to the repulsors, bouncing us over a Rhino that was just emerging from the access tunnel, with barely a centimetre to spare between us, the blocky armoured vehicle, and the roof of the tunnel.⁴²

‘Flicker, stop showing off for the commissar,’ Amberley said, her tone indulgently reproving.

‘Sorry, boss.’ We shot out of the tunnel like a shell from the barrel of an Earthshaker, and headed skyward at a pace that would undoubtedly have tried Jurgen’s stomach had he still been with us: mine too, to be honest, if the aircar hadn’t been fitted with inertial dampers. As it was the ride seemed smooth enough, and I settled back to enjoy it.

‘I met Lazurus at the briefing,’ I said conversationally. Amberley regarded me with cool detachment, giving nothing away beyond a barely concerned acknowledgement of the name. ‘He asked how you were.’

‘Did you tell him?’ Amberley asked casually. I shook my head.

‘I said you’d seemed well enough when I saw you on Gravalax.’ To my surprise she actually laughed out loud at that, as mellifluously as ever.

‘You really do have a talent for this sort of thing, don’t you?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said cautiously. Amberley knew me as well as anyone in the galaxy, and saw further beneath the mask I usually presented to it than anyone else, but I was still not sure quite how far that was. ‘It depends what sort of thing we’re talking about.’

‘Diplomacy, misdirection, sneaking about.’ She grinned happily at me again. ‘You know, inquisitor stuff.’

‘You’d know more about that than I would,’ I said, and she laughed again.

‘See what I mean?’

‘He seemed to think I was looking for someone called Metheius,’ I said, refusing to be deflected. ‘Why would he think that?’

‘Because he knows I am, and he knows you’re an associate of mine. Lazurus and I are working together, sort of.’

‘Sort of?’ I asked, looking out at the lights of Principia Mons below and around us. The night was humming with life, and the thought of the ravening swarm about to descend on all those happy, oblivious people was a depressing one. Amberley nodded.

‘The Mechanicus and the Ordo Xenos have a joint project running. It’s been going on for decades, but about a dozen years ago it ran into a bit of a hiccough, on Perlia.’ She looked at me narrowly, and after a moment a sudden horrified understanding burst over me.

‘The Valley of Daemons,’ I said, the memory of the hidden Mechanicus shrine I’d stumbled across while leading my ragtag army to safety surfacing for the first time in years. The facility had been gutted when we found it, everyone and everything dead apart from a single surviving combat servitor, which had given me an anxious few moments, and at the time I’d been too busy trying to fend off an army of blood-maddened orks to think too much about the mystery. I did so again now, though, in the light of this new and disturbing information.

‘That’s right,’ Amberley said evenly, no doubt waiting to see how much I’d be able to work out for myself. I tried to dredge as much detail out of my memory as possible, seeing again the vast dam collapsing, the tidal wave we’d unleashed scouring its way down the valley, and the ork army besieging us being swept into welcome oblivion. But it was what I’d seen before that that had been, in its own way, even more disturbing.

‘Everyone had been killed,’ I said slowly. ‘We thought the orks had done it at first, but there wasn’t enough damage for that. The place had been hit cleanly and surgically.’ I remembered something else. ‘All the databanks in the cogitators had been wiped, and something had been taken from a vault there. It looked like a melta had been used on it.’

‘That was Metheius’s doing,’ Amberley said. She leaned forward to tap Pelton on the shoulder. ‘Take the scenic route, Flicker.’ Understanding what she meant, Pelton peeled away from our original heading to begin a leisurely circuit of the palace gardens, where it seemed the Governor was holding a ball. Lanterns flickered in the ornamental shrubs beneath us, and elegantly dressed couples strolled arm in arm along illuminated paths or rotated around one another on the dance floor floating in the centre of the lake. No one glanced up as we passed, apparently taking us for just another late arrival, if they even noticed us at all.

‘All by himself?’ I asked, finding that hard to credit.

Amberley shook her head. ‘Of course not. He had help, and outside contacts, but for a long time he was one of the most senior magi working on the project.’

‘Which was what, exactly?’ I asked. Amberley hesitated, as if wondering

how far to take me into her confidence.

‘While the dam was being built,’ she said at last, ‘the Mechanicus unearthed an artefact. It was unlike anything they’d ever seen before, so they brought it to the Ordo Xenos, to see if we might be able to help them identify it.’

I felt a prickling sensation in my scalp. There could be only one explanation for such a discovery. ‘Let me guess,’ I said. ‘It predated humanity’s presence on Perlia.’

Amberley shook her head slowly. ‘It predated humanity’s presence in the galaxy,’ she said quietly. ‘Us, and every other race we know of, except possibly the Necrontyr.’ She paused for a moment. ‘And it was still functional.’ The tingling sensation worked its way down my spine in a far from pleasant fashion.

‘What does it do?’ I asked, unable to keep a note of awe from my voice.

‘We still don’t know, even after generations of study, but what little data we were able to recover once the orks were eliminated and we could return to the site would seem to indicate that Metheius had made some kind of breakthrough.’

‘Which he seems reluctant to share,’ I concluded.

Amberley nodded grimly. ‘Quite. He must have had confederates within the facility for their attack to have succeeded so completely. Eight of his fellow tech-priests vanished along with him, so it’s not hard to guess who they might have been.’

‘The damage we saw was consistent with an assault from the outside,’ I said. ‘So he must have had help there too. A mercenary band, something like that.’ The memory of the dead tech-priests and their guards came back to haunt me once again. ‘A competent one too. There was hardly any collateral damage. Even a squad of Astartes could hardly have been more precise.’

‘That’s what we concluded,’ Amberley said, ‘and in the confusion surrounding the orkish invasion, they were able to get clean off-planet before anyone knew they were gone.’

‘I see,’ I said, my head spinning. ‘And you think he’s taken refuge on Periremunda.’

‘It’s a possibility,’ Amberley said. ‘I came here to check it out, and found Lazurus following up the same lead. We’ve been sharing our findings ever since.’ She chewed her lower lip, looking mildly vexed. ‘Unfortunately this

tyranid thing complicates matters a bit. I can't really sit back and leave the 'stealers to bring the sky down on our heads, so Lazurus is getting a clear run at Metheius while I'm out bug-swatting.'

'I thought you were on the same side,' I said, confused. Amberley looked at me thoughtfully.

'You know how it is. The Inquisition and the Mechanicus are meant to be equal partners, but whichever of us recovers the artefact gets to be a bit more equal than the other.'

I sighed, and shook my head. 'It's a lot simpler in the Guard,' I said. 'See the enemy, kill the enemy. We don't have to worry about all this political stuff.' That wasn't entirely true, of course, but life was certainly a great deal less complicated where I usually sat.

'No doubt,' Amberley said, not fooled for a moment. She shrugged. 'So there it is: unimaginably ancient xenos artefact somewhere on the planet in the hands of a renegade, the hive fleet poised above our heads ready to rip this world apart, hidden 'stealer broods everywhere making an early start on their behalf, and now a bloody Chaos cult crawling out of the woodwork just in case we were getting bored.' She forced a carefree smile to her face, with an effort few people other than me would have been able to detect. 'Welcome to my world, Ciaphas.'



Editorial Note:

While Cain was running around the planetary capital, getting himself tangled up in my investigation, the rest of the Imperial Guard was reacting to the dire news Zyvan had just imparted to its senior commanders with its usual efficiency. Since, almost inevitably, Cain doesn't bother to mention any of this in his own account I've appended the following extract from the memoirs of Jenit Sulla, who at the time was a mere lieutenant in the 597th, in the faint hope that it might prove illuminating. As always where this particular author is concerned, readers with a refined appreciation of the complex and subtle nuances of which the Gothic language is capable may wish to skip this passage entirely.

From Like a Phoenix on the Wing: The Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101 M42

My readers can readily appreciate the consternation with which Colonel Kasteen's news was greeted upon her return from the capital, and the keenness with which we felt the absence of Commissar Cain, whose steady demeanour and steely resolve in the face of even the most dire of crises was so unfailingly inspirational to those of us who were privileged to serve alongside him. I for one, however, took heart from the fact that he would soon be among us once again, and resolved that upon his return he would not find me, or any of the women and men under my command, any the less prepared to confront this most terrifying of foes than he would be himself. After all, we had faced and bested the tyrannid fiends on Corania, albeit at the most terrible cost, and I had no doubt that we would prevail once again,

under the steadfast leadership of our colonel and the inspiring presence of our commissar.

By the time he returned, his habitual jaunty demeanour somewhat muted by the heavy responsibility he must now have felt,⁴³ our preparations to meet this fearsome foe were well advanced. Colonel Kasteen's foresight in anticipating that the presence of genestealers on this fascinatingly fractured world might presage the arrival of a splinter fleet had been well founded, and I like to think that the 597th was by far the most prepared of all the regiments on Periremunda for the onslaught to come. For my part, I had been drilling my platoon in the painfully learned lessons we had acquired on Corania ever since the colonel had issued her far-sighted order to practise them, and felt nothing but confidence in the women and men under my command.

When the flesh-moulded abominations of the hive fleets dared to show themselves openly, they would not find us wanting in fighting spirit, of that I had not the faintest scintilla of doubt. But when the foe eventually appeared in front of our eagerly waiting weapons, it was to be far from the comforting chill of Hoarfell, and in a manner none of us could possibly have anticipated.



TWELVE

Making the most of her pose as an aristocratic parasite, Amberley had taken over the penthouse suite of the most exclusive hotel in Principia Mons, which, among many other amenities, boasted its own landing pad, tucked away behind a small but pleasantly-scented roof garden. Pelton conveyed us there without further ado, coasting to a halt and popping the rear doors of the luxurious speeder with all the aplomb of the chauffeur he was pretending to be. The scent of hegantha and callium drifted inside the aircar, both blooms, I recalled, of which Amberley was particularly fond. I found myself wondering for a moment if she'd chosen the penthouse because they were already growing there, or if she'd had them planted after she'd arrived.⁴⁴

'Very nice,' I commented, stepping out into the cool night air. The city was spread out almost as far as the eye could see, until it ended abruptly at the lip of the plateau in a sudden cessation of light and motion as sharp as a knife-edge. Most of it was far enough below us for the never-ending noise to be muted, and the ground cars scuttling around like glowbugs seemed to skitter silently along the luminated thoroughfares in the distance.

Amberley nodded. 'It'll do. It fits my cover, and the flight pad means we can come and go as we please without exciting any more comment than necessary.'

I nodded too, picturing her walking though the lobby in power armour, and suppressed a grin. The staff of such an establishment was discreet, I had no doubt, but there were still some things that would raise a few eyebrows. 'I'm sure it does,' I said.

Amberley shrugged. 'They're used to all kinds of eccentric behaviour here. They'll tolerate pretty much anything if you pay them enough, and

they won't ask too many questions. Even so, it never hurts to be circumspect.'

'I'm sure it doesn't,' I said. I got a bit more used to her methods over the years, as she dragged me into her covert activities time and time again, but I never quite managed to shake off the feeling that she tended to adopt disguises and elaborate cover stories more for the fun of it than because they were strictly necessary.⁴⁵ Amberley laughed, took my arm, and led me inside while Pelton powered the luxurious speeder down. 'Modest little place you've got here.'

The main living room was huge, tinted windows looking out and down at the urban panorama, the neat, comfortable furnishings supplemented by plants in tasteful ceramic urns and a surprising amount of weaponry left lying around the place. Amberley shrugged as my eyes fell on the scattering of ordnance.

'It pays to be prepared,' she said cheerfully.

'That it does,' Yanbel agreed, doing something with his mechadendrites to the barrel of the heavy bolter I'd last seen attached to the forearm of Amberley's power suit. He held it up to the light, squinting along its length with a faint whirring sound as his augmetic eyes focussed on something too minute to see, and emitted a grunt of satisfaction before reaching for a small jar of sanctified oil with one of his natural hands and beginning to bless the thing.

Over in the far corner, Rakel looked up from what looked like a hushed conversation with Simeon (they seemed to spend a lot of time together, I noticed, probably because in their differing ways they were both as marginally sane as one another), and shot me a venomous look.

'It's you,' she informed me unnecessarily, her eyes skittering around the space behind me as she spoke. 'But I don't feel the void.'

'Jurgen's still back at the Arbites building,' I said, taking my best guess at what she was blathering about. If Keesh came up with anything else about our mysterious assassin, or Zyvan learned anything new about the tyranid threat, I wanted to know right away, and I wanted my aide on the spot as a visible and odoriferous reminder to both of them to keep me in the loop. The psyker relaxed a little.

'The shadow's hungry,' she told me seriously, then turned back to Simeon. 'His mind's all shiny, like a mirror.' I hadn't a clue what to make of that, so I just smiled politely.

‘Commissar. Mainly brisk of ya!’ Zemelda entered the room, looking like a bad actress in a drawing room farce, her crisply-starched maid’s uniform at incongruous odds with the green fringe hanging over her face, and the bulge of a badly concealed laspistol just below her left breast. She seemed genuinely pleased to see me, despite making no more sense than Rakel, and I smiled in return.

‘It’s good to see you too,’ I said, taking my best guess at the meaning of the Periremundan street slang, and the erstwhile snack vendor beamed at me as though I’d just told her she’d won a thousand credits. ‘I see you’re settling in all right.’

‘You bet.’ She nodded vigorously. ‘Best job I ever had. Beats the hell out of flogging gristle pies or flyposting for slash gigs,⁴⁶ I can tell you.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ I said, trying to mask my bemusement.

Zemelda nodded again, with undiminished enthusiasm. ‘It’s like when we were juves, playing games, but this time it’s for real, you know?’

I nodded, not really trusting myself to speak. It was the same eager enthusiasm I was used to seeing in the funks⁴⁷ just arrived from the recruiting stations on Valhalla, all fired up with martial zeal and the supposed glory of combat. The bright ones wised up fast, kept their heads down, and got on with the grim business of survival. The rest became heroes or dead, quite often both, and almost instantly forgotten by their squadmates. With an unexpected pang, I found myself wondering which category Zemelda would fall into.

‘She’s being a big help,’ Amberley said, with an indulgent grin at her eager new assistant. ‘The sort of inbred imbecile I’m supposed to be wouldn’t be seen dead without a ladies maid to run errands for her, and Zemmie fits the bill perfectly.’ She nodded at the psyker in the corner. ‘Rakel doesn’t really look the part, even on a good day.’

‘And I look like a kleeB in a dress,’ Pelton added, following us into the room. That conjured up an image I’d rather not have had inflicted on my synapses, and I nodded slowly.

‘I can believe that,’ I said. Zemelda had gravitated towards him the moment he appeared, and I couldn’t help noticing the half-smiles they’d exchanged as they registered one another’s presence.

Pelton shrugged. ‘Joking aside, she’s got a real aptitude for dark ops.’ Zemelda coloured slightly at the words of praise. ‘She can live a legend as well as a pro, and she’s getting to be a pretty good pistol shot. Took down a

hybrid the last brood we raided with a single las-bolt, just as it was drawing a bead on Simeon.’ The familiar easygoing grin appeared on his face. ‘Not that I suppose he’d have noticed even if he had been shot.’

‘That’s beside the point,’ Amberley said, her tone mildly reproving. ‘I prefer my associates unperforated. They’re more useful that way.’ Not for the first time I found myself impressed by the easy camaraderie she seemed able to inspire in the motley rabble she tended to surround herself with. I saw a lot of faces come and go over the years, but all of them seemed to share it, however diverse their lives and backgrounds had been before they found themselves swept into her orbit.

‘You won’t get any argument from me,’ Pelton agreed, and the two of them wandered off, leaving Amberley and me to gaze out at the night-shrouded city together.

‘They seem to have hit it off,’ I said, and Amberley nodded.

‘No bad thing,’ she said. ‘If she’s going to hang around with us she’ll need a good grounding in combat techniques, and Flicker’s the only one in the group proficient enough to teach her.’ A self-mocking grin appeared on her face. ‘Apart from me, of course, and I don’t have the time to baby-sit.’

‘He seems to know a lot about undercover work,’ I said. Amberley nodded again.

‘He was in deep for a long time, infiltrating a shadow cartel in the Torredon Gap. Too long, probably. He had to do some questionable things to maintain his cover, and there were suspicions he’d turned.’ I nodded slowly. Much of the Torredon subsector was riven by warp storms, leaving only a few safe routes for the merchant vessels plying the trade routes there, and piracy was a never-ending problem.

‘So he was with the Naval Provosts before you recruited him?’ I asked.

Amberley shook her head. ‘He was an arbitrator, until the chastener running him decided he’d become more of a liability than an asset, and tried to reel him in. Flicker disagreed with that assessment, and it ended badly.’

‘How badly?’ I asked.

Amberley sighed. ‘There were a lot of bodies. Flicker thought if he was going to be yanked out of the field he was going to clean house first, and started taking out all the key players he’d identified in the cartel.’ A note of grudging admiration entered her voice. ‘He was smart, I have to give him that: set one of the senior directors up as a pretender to the high seat, took out a couple of the second echelon, and pointed the finger. It was a

bloodbath. By the time his handlers caught up with him the cartel was in shreds and anyone capable of repairing the damage was dead.'

'So what was wrong with that?' I asked, in honest perplexity. It sounded to me as if he'd done the galaxy a favour.

Amberley looked at me pityingly. 'Think about it. An arbitrator stepping outside the law, however laudable his motives, isn't something the Arbites can take lightly. Luckily I happened to be around when they were getting ready to flush him, and thought a talent like that shouldn't go to waste.'

'I see.' I nodded, reflecting yet again how relatively uncomplicated things were in the Imperial Guard. On the battlefield you do whatever it takes to win, and that's the end of it. 'Well, at least it seems Zemelda's in good hands.'

Amberley looked at me speculatively. 'I'm hoping she won't be the only one tonight,' she said.

We were enjoying a leisurely breakfast the next morning when Lazurus arrived unexpectedly, a clattering ornithopter bearing the cogwheel sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus settling onto the flight pad beyond the hegantha bushes with all the fluttering grace of an iron chicken. Amberley looked up from her ackenberry waffles as he entered through the patio doors, and nodded a cordial greeting.

'Pull up a chair,' she invited, a trifle indistinctly, while Zemelda, still apparently revelling in her impenetrable disguise, poured a cup of recaf and placed it on the table in front of him. Emperor alone knows how she expected him to drink it, what with not having a mouth and all, but it was the sort of thing a servant was supposed to do, so she probably thought it added to the solidity of her cover or something. The simple task accomplished, she went to poke the dish of salma kedgereee on the sideboard with a serving ladle, and try to look as though she wasn't listening avidly to the conversation around the table.

Lazurus inclined his head courteously as he took the proffered seat. 'Thank you, but I've already ingested nutrient this week,' he returned, with an obvious effort at good manners. He glanced in my direction, but if he was surprised to see me there, made no sign of the fact. 'Commissar, you look well. I trust your interaction with the inquisitor has proven satisfactory?'

'It has,' Amberley said, with a barely perceptible grin in my direction, 'but I fear you've had a wasted journey. Ciaphas has no more idea of Metheius's

whereabouts than either of us do.'

'That's most disappointing,' the magos said, managing to sound as if it was anything but. 'I had hoped a man of his apparent resourcefulness could open a few of the doors that have so far remained closed to us.'

'As had I,' I assured him blandly, as if I'd been privy to the search for the renegade cogboy since the beginning, and as I spoke I found a number of possibilities suggesting themselves. 'My position in the Commissariat gives me access to all the intelligence being analysed by the Guard and the Arbites, for instance.' I glanced at Amberley. 'Unless, of course, you've already taken Zyvan and Keesh into your confidence?'

'Not about this,' she confirmed. 'They have enough to worry about with the 'stealers and the hive fleet.' She shrugged, pushing her plate away, and taking a sip of her recaf. 'Besides, the *shadowlight*—'

'The what?' I interrupted, a forkful of kedgerie halfway to my mouth.

Lazurus chimed in helpfully. 'The xenos artefact Metheius absconded with. Since his departure we've uncovered more items in the Valley of Daemons, including a selection of metal tablets of unknown composition containing fragments of script, one of which appears to refer to it by that name.'

A familiar dry cough announced the arrival of Mott, who had been listening to the latter stages of the conversation, and seemed unable to resist verbalising the torrent of related information encoded within his augmented cerebellum any longer.

'The language has never been reliably deciphered,' he put in, reaching for the insulated jug of recaf Zemelda had recently put down on the sideboard and pouring himself a cupful without seeming to look at it. I flinched, anticipating scalded fingers and the crash of the cup on the carpet, but he judged it to a nicety and carried on talking without apparently pausing to draw breath. 'However, a few earlier examples have been discovered scattered across the galaxy, and a rough attempt made to assign meaning to some of the symbols. The main difficulty with this is that the examples so far recovered, though uniformly ancient beyond imagining, appear to originate from different points within a span of aeons, so it's by no means certain that any established symbology would have remained unchanged during the lifetime of the civilisation that produced them.'

Remembering the fractured Gothic Zemelda lapsed into when she forgot no one else present was from around here, I could well believe that, but

suppressed the urge to nod in agreement. Once Mott got going, the last thing you wanted to do was encourage him. 'On the other hand, the regularity of the script, and the uniformity of workmanship of the few artefacts and other fragments recovered across such a diverse range of sites, would seem to indicate that it was a remarkably stable society, as well as long lasting, so it's by no means beyond the realm of possibility that at least a fair degree of consistency was maintained.'

'Thank you, Caractacus,' Amberley said, glaring at me with a 'now look what you've done' expression on her face. 'As I was saying, the existence of the artefact, whatever it might have been called, is a secret known only to a few, and both we and the Mechanicus would prefer to keep it that way.' Lazurus nodded his agreement, but my mind was only just catching up with the last thing he'd said before Mott's logorrhoea got triggered, and I stared at him in some perplexity.

'Hold on a minute,' I said. 'You've found more of this stuff? When did that happen?'

'When do you think?' Amberley asked, reaching for a slice of buttered toast. 'While they were rebuilding the dam you blew up, of course.'

Lazurus nodded again. 'The resulting flood rearranged the topography of the valley quite substantially.' A warning glance from Amberley forestalled Mott from filling us all in on quite how much that was, how much topsoil had been removed in the process, and how many orks had got their feet wet. 'In particular a new site was revealed, containing quite a lot of interest to us, including further devices that, as yet, have failed to yield up their secrets.'

'Which is all very interesting,' Amberley put in, bisecting her toast with a small, precise bite, and spraying me with crumbs as she completed the sentence, 'but we're drifting away from the point.' She looked at me speculatively. 'How do you think your access to the military intelligence grid can help us to pinpoint Metheius? Preferably before he becomes indigestion for a 'nid.'

'Because the analysts are looking for evidence of 'stealer infestation,' I pointed out, 'and nothing else. The fact that they missed the Chaos cult that tried to kill me last night proves that.' I glanced at Lazurus as I spoke, but he betrayed no surprise at my words. Not that I expected to see any, cogboys of his rank are more clockwork than human anyway, but I imagine that whatever conversation ensued between him and Amberley after I left

the room would have been interesting to overhear. 'If I ask Zyvan for access to the raw data, I might find something they missed, because it fell outside the parameters they were looking for.'

'It's worth a try,' Amberley said, nodding thoughtfully. 'I've only been getting the filtered stuff, and asking to look at the source material myself would only give rise to awkward questions. So far as the Guard is concerned, I'm just here to advise on the tyranid problem.'

'Regrettably, I find myself in a similar position,' Lazurus agreed. 'I may be advising the lord general on the most judicious use of the Omnissiah's bounty in the furtherance of our cause, but, as a mere civilian, any intelligence I may be privy to is strictly on a need to know basis.'

'I'll talk to Zyvan,' I said. 'Keesh too. If I tell them I'm looking for leads on our mystery assassin, they ought to co-operate.' I glanced at the elaborate chronograph on the wall, which was ten minutes fast and encrusted with far too many gilt angels. 'I'll have to swing by the Arbites building anyway, to pick Jurgen up.'

In all honesty the only thing I expected my offer of help to lead to was an excellent excuse to visit Amberley every few days to report in person on my regrettable lack of progress, and enjoy a pleasant few hours of her company. But, as so often seems to happen, that apparently trivial gesture was to fling me into a maelstrom of danger and treachery far beyond anything I could possibly have imagined.



THIRTEEN

The next few days were as unnerving as you might imagine, the nebulous outline of the shadow in the warp continuing to creep towards the feeble glow of the Periremunda system centred in the imaging field of our hololiths, until the morning it engulfed us altogether. I happened to be in the command centre at the time, with Kasteen and Broklaw, and all three of us exhaled audibly as the boundary of the zone of darkness lapped around the flickering pinpoint of light at last, and began to draw it ever deeper inside itself, like an amoeba digesting some microscopic piece of flotsam.

‘That’s it,’ Broklaw said laconically, and I found myself glancing up at the skylights in the roof of the old warehouse, an irrational corner of my mind half expecting us to be plunged into literal darkness. Nothing of the kind actually happened, of course. Ironically, the almost perpetual cloud cover had lifted across most of Hoarfell that day, and bright sunlight lanced down into the seething mass of soldiers going about their business from a blue sky dappled with blotches of cloud. Of course it was still far too cold outside for my liking, the wind cutting straight to the bone even through the weave of my greatcoat, and just as inevitably the Valhallans had cranked the big doors open a little to make the most of it. I’d found the relief from the usual dank murkiness positively cheering, at least until I’d dropped by to see what was going on among the senior command staff.

‘Any luck yet?’ Kasteen had greeted me as I’d arrived, and I’d shaken my head ruefully. As I might have expected, Zyvan and Keesh had accumulated an impressive amount of raw intelligence between them, with more coming in all the time, and I’d normally have found the task of wading through it onerous in the extreme, not to mention impossible without help. Luckily I’d been able to pass the bulk of the files over to Mott, who positively relished

that sort of thing, and he'd reduced most of the data to neatly cross-referenced summaries before lobbing it back to me for my expert evaluation; which, so far, I'm bound to admit, had come up with precisely nothing.

Nevertheless, I'd been grateful for the distraction, as otherwise I'd have had little else to do apart from worrying about the hive fleet approaching us, and whatever its still undetected advance guard might have been up to. So I suppose it was just sheer bad luck that I happened to stop by to ask Kasteen for a progress report at almost exactly the same moment that the shockwave in warp space preceding the 'nid swarm engulfed the system.

'We're on our own,' Kasteen agreed with her subordinate, watching the stain spread further across the wavering and insubstantial starfield projected above the hololith table. This was quite literally true. Now that we were inside the shadow there could be no hope of any astropathic communication from Coronus, or from the flotilla of starships hurrying to our aid. We could still estimate the fleet's position, though, and I stared at the little cluster of contact icons, willing it to arrive before whatever tide of chittering death was lurking inside the pool of darkness that was now swallowing us whole. Of course that was even more problematic now than it had been, as the warp currents themselves would be affected by the mass of the hive fleet, although whether that was going to speed or hinder our would-be rescuers only the Emperor could say.

'Better step up our alert status,' I suggested, and Kasteen nodded tightly.

'Already on it. Whenever they show themselves, we'll be ready.' She nodded at the hololith. 'Irrational I know, but I half expected them to start pouring out of the woodwork as soon as the shadow arrived.' Her tone was light, but in the slightly forced way that revealed an element of barely-contained fear. Knowing the regiment's history, I could hardly blame her for that: both the former units that now made it up had been chewed to pieces on Corania. Kasteen had been a mere company commander at the time, and had ended up being saddled with the responsibility for an entire regiment by the simple fact of being practically the only senior officer to survive. It was the merest good fortune that she'd turned out to be so levelheaded and gifted a leader.

'Me too,' I admitted, and we shared a moment of wry amusement, although I don't suppose she thought I was anywhere near as sincere as I actually was. I'd fought tyranids before too, and the idea of facing wave

after wave of genetically engineered killing machines was a sobering one to say the least.

‘We stopped them before, we can stop them again,’ Broklaw said briskly, and we all nodded gravely as though we believed it.

‘Colonel.’ A vox-operator looked up from her control lectern, and waved to attract our attention. ‘A message from the lord general.’

‘My office. Put it through.’ Kasteen acknowledged the woman briskly, as though the moment of hesitation had never been, and led the way towards the metal staircase giving access to the mezzanine. As we hurried up the clattering stairs she glanced back at Broklaw and myself. ‘Looks like it’s going to be sooner rather than later.’

In that, to everyone’s unspoken relief except mine, she was completely wrong. Zyvan’s voice was clipped and incisive as he acknowledged her greeting.

‘Colonel. Is Commissar Cain with you?’

‘He’s right here.’ She glanced across at me, and I tapped the comm-bead in my ear, joining the conversation.

‘How can I help you, general?’ I asked, trying to ignore the faint flutter of apprehension that flickered in my gut. In my experience, whenever someone powerful and well connected asks for you by name, it seldom presages anything good.

‘I’ve a message from Inquisitor Vail,’ Zyvan said, almost succeeding in masking his irritation at acting as an intermediary. It made sense, though. If she still wanted to keep her presence on Periremunda a secret, there could be fewer more secure lines of communication than going through the lord general’s office. ‘She’s on her way to Hoarfell, and wants you to meet her at the aerodrome.’

‘You can tell her I’m on my way,’ I said, with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. Even the prospect of seeing Amberley again wasn’t quite enough to outweigh the near certainty that she was about to drag me deeper into whatever it was she was really here to do. Refusal being completely out of the question, though, I took refuge in the public persona of Cain the modest hero. I turned to Kasteen and Broklaw, who both looked vaguely stunned by this unexpected turn of events, not to mention a little awestruck by the sudden reminder of my exalted connections. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to manage without me for a while,’ I told them.

‘We’ll manage,’ Kasteen assured me gravely, as if my presence there

would make the slightest difference to her battle plans. ‘Any idea what this is all about?’

‘Not a clue,’ I admitted, trying to sound as though the prospect wasn’t almost as terrifying as facing the ’nids. I shrugged, in as carefree a manner as I could contrive. ‘I’ll tell you when I get back, if it’s not too highly classified,’ I said breezily, hoping I’d live long enough to get the chance.

The journey to the aerodrome was as brief and eventful as such trips generally were with Jurgen driving, our scout-pattern Salamander carving its way through the civilian traffic as though they were enemy foot soldiers although with fewer casualties. Jurgen was as familiar with the sturdy little vehicle as he was with his lasgun, and although his approach to driving was as robust as ever, we never actually hit anything sharing the road with us. We came pretty close at times, but since we were surrounded by armour plate, and the civilian traffic wasn’t, neither of us found the occasional near miss unduly alarming.

As we rattled and roared our way along the main access road to the landing field, leaving a turbulent wake of profanity and blaring clarions behind us, I noticed that the melta he habitually carried when things got even more dangerous than usual was tucked into the driver’s compartment beside him. He was clearly expecting trouble too, which was no bad thing.

There was no one else in the galaxy I’d rather have covering my back if we turned out to be right, and the heavy weapon had made a crucial difference to our chances of survival on more than one occasion.

I’d taken what precautions I could as well, fitting fresh power cells into my chainsword and laspistol, and strapping on the carapace armour I’d acquired on Gravalax beneath my greatcoat, which concealed it nicely.

‘Do you think that’s them now?’ Jurgen asked, swinging us around a wallowing heavy transporter with what looked like the guts of a shuttle engine protruding perilously from the flatbed on every side, and I ducked reflexively as a tangle of pipe work thicker than my forearm all but brushed the cap from my head. He took his hand from the throttle for a moment to point a grime-encrusted finger at a sleek Aquila-class shuttle descending on the pad we’d been told to head for.

Ignoring the eloquent hand gestures of the startled driver behind us, I nodded. ‘Must be,’ I said. In keeping with her desire to remain incognito as much as possible Amberley tended to avoid plastering her personal

transport with Inquisition sigils, but the crimson and grey colour scheme was a fair indication of its ownership to anyone familiar with the organisation she worked for. I found myself wondering for a moment if the presence of a space-capable shuttle meant that her old associate Orelus was orbiting patiently somewhere above our heads, but doubted that. Periremunda was a small and provincial kind of place, and the presence of a rogue trader in the system would hardly have gone unnoticed for long.⁴⁸ I glanced at my chronograph. 'She's punctual, at any rate.'

I should have known better than to verbalise the thought. As I've mentioned innumerable times before in the course of these memoirs, Jurgen's adherence to protocol had a tendency to border on the obsessive. Now, no doubt considering it in some way essential to be waiting on the pad when the shuttle grounded, he accelerated, flinging me back against the heavy bolter on its pintel mount, and scattering the gaggle of PDF troopers manning the checkpoint at the aerodrome perimeter. Glancing back, I saw one of them yelling excitedly into a vox-unit, but at least none of them had the wit to fire at us,⁴⁹ which was an unexpected blessing. Thanking the Emperor for small mercies I clung to whatever handholds I could find, while Jurgen slalomed us around an obstacle course of fuel bowsers, slack-jawed engineers, and cargo-handling servitors as though trying to avoid an incoming artillery barrage shell by shell. My comm-bead crackled.

'Commissar Cain, this is Darien Down.' The traffic controller's voice was tense, which was hardly surprising under the circumstances. The poor frakker probably thought we were about to be blown halfway to the Golden Throne again, and I was in another frantic dash to avert disaster. 'Is there an emergency we should be appraised of?'

'Everything's fine,' I assured him, with all the soothing sincerity I could muster while my fillings were being shaken loose by Jurgen's driving. 'Vital military dispatches to collect, that's all.'

'I see.' He clearly didn't, but then in my experience civilians never really expect to understand military matters. All that mattered to him was that whatever I was up to had nothing to do with the safety of the star port, and that was that.

Despite Jurgen's heroic efforts the shuttle touched down a few seconds before we reached the pad, its cargo ramp descending as it came, so that the lip of it kissed the rockcrete a mere heartbeat behind the landing skids. I looked at it expectantly, waiting for Amberley to appear at the top of the

dull iron gradient, but the cargo compartment remained empty, and the engines continued to scream, throttled back just enough to keep the whole thing from lifting again. Recognising the telltale signs of a pilot prepared for a rapid dust-off in a hot LZ,⁵⁰ I ducked instinctively below the level of the armour plate surrounding me, my eyes scanning our surroundings for any sign of a threat.

‘Get aboard as fast as you can,’ Amberley’s voice said in my ear, and taking her words as literally as he did any other instruction Jurgen gunned the engine again, hurtling towards the narrow ramp at a speed anyone else would have regarded as insane.

Even inured as I was to his cavalier handling of the little vehicle by a decade and a half of familiarity, I found myself flinching as we bounced up the metal incline, our spinning treads millimetres from the edge, and into the tight confines of the miniscule cargo bay. Even now I find it hard to believe that we didn’t just bounce off the bulkhead facing us, but as always my aide had judged it to a nicety, slamming the abused gears into reverse, and bringing us to a halt with barely a centimetre to spare. As he cut the engine our pilot fed full power to his own, and I felt a familiar surge of acceleration at the base of my much-abused spine. As I clambered out I caught a final dizzying glimpse of Darien Down receding into the distance before the rising ramp thudded into place, and sealed us in. I took an unsteady breath, redolent of Jurgen.

‘Nice driving,’ Amberley said, entering the narrow hold through a door in the forward bulkhead.

Jurgen scratched his head, beaming at the unexpected compliment. ‘Thank you, miss,’ he said, blushing beneath the grime.

Amberley smiled at me, and I returned the expression as best I could. She was dressed in a skin-tight bodyglove, which would normally have been more than enough to raise my spirits, but unlike the one I’d seen her in at the Arbites building in Principia Mons this one was midnight black and festooned with sockets and truncated power cables. It just had to be the dermal interface layer for her power armour, and that realisation was enough to start my palms tingling in earnest. Wherever we were going, she thought she was going to need it.

‘I always thought it was impolite to keep a lady waiting,’ I said, trying to sound as relaxed as I could, and Amberley grinned at me, probably not fooled for a second.

‘Come on through,’ she said, indicating the door behind her. ‘You might as well be comfortable while we get where we’re going.’

‘Which is where, exactly?’ I asked, following her into a compartment that might almost have been the lounge of a small hotel suite, if it hadn’t been for the sets of crash webbing on the generously padded seats. I dropped into the nearest, one of a group around a crystal-topped beverage table, and Zemelda leaned across it to deposit a welcome goblet of amasec in front of me, still apparently playing the servant with undiminished enthusiasm.

‘Thought you might need this,’ she said.

‘You thought right,’ I agreed, swallowing half of it too quickly to fully appreciate so finely aged an example of the distiller’s art, and taking in her appearance with vague surprise. Like Amberley, the former snack vendor was dressed for trouble, in dark fatigues stippled with hive-pattern camo,⁵¹ a bandana of the same material keeping her hair, which seemed brighter and greener than ever by contrast, out of her eyes. Her laspistol was holstered openly at her waist, and a couple of frag grenades hung from the utility vest around her torso, next to a wicked looking combat blade. Amberley dropped into the seat opposite me, and smiled indulgently at her protégé.

‘Our little girl is growing up,’ she said cheerfully.

‘So I see,’ I said. I glanced around the compartment, the barren wastes of the Periremundan landscape hurtling past beneath us too quickly to distinguish any details, the occasional plateau there and gone in a mere flicker of shadow. Most of her entourage were here, Pelton dressed almost identically to his green-haired girlfriend and cradling his autorifle protectively, while Simeon glowered at us from the corner, twitching a little now and again as his automatic implants regulated the flow of chemicals coursing through his system. His shotgun was across his lap, and he kept touching the spare magazines of reloads hanging from the bandolier across his chest, muttering something too low to be audible, but which had the cadences of the prayer of accuracy. Rakel stood next to him, her face even more strained than usual, directing a pained and venomous glance behind my head. My nose apprising me of the reason, I turned to Jorgen. ‘Perhaps you’d better check out the Salamander,’ I suggested. ‘We might need it when we land.’

‘Very good, sir.’ Jorgen’s arm twitched in the vague semblance of a salute, and he vanished through the door in the bulkhead. As he disappeared behind the thick metal plating Rakel’s expression relaxed into something

approximating her usual air of distraction, and she nodded as though listening to a conversation only she could hear.

‘The wind’s blowing again,’ she said, ‘and its teeth are sharp.’

‘I’m glad you’re feeling better,’ I said diplomatically, resolving to keep Jurgen out of the way as much as possible. Not that I really gave a frak about the barmy little spook, of course, but she was armed again, and I didn’t want her becoming so agitated by his presence that she might think of alleviating the discomfort of it by using her laspistol. For one thing my aide’s peculiar gift had saved my life several times already, and I had every expectation of it continuing to do so for as long as he remained around, and for another I didn’t fancy the idea of her popping off a gun in such a confined space. It wouldn’t breach the hull, of course, that was proof against the heat and stresses of re-entry, never mind a puny little las-bolt, but it could easily ricochet off the metal, putting my life in danger.

Mott was sitting at the table too, a mug of recaf in his hand, and a vaguely expectant air hovering about him that seemed to indicate that he was itching to start explaining what we were all doing here as soon as Amberley let him. Yanbel was in a corner next to the small door leading to the flight deck, doing arcane things to Amberley’s power suit, which loomed over everything like an Astartes captain at a garden party. As everyone’s presence registered with me, the obvious question occurred (apart from ‘what the frak are we doing here,’ of course, which I knew better than to ask a second time. I knew Amberley well enough by now to know that she’d explain what was going on when she was good and ready, and no power in the galaxy could hurry her up).

‘Who’s flying this crate?’ I asked.

Amberley shrugged. ‘Pontius, I think,’ she said, as though the name would mean anything to me.

Pelton flicked a stray lock of hair, which had escaped his bandana, out of his eyes. ‘Ex-Navy, like most of the boss’s crew. He’s good. If he has to he can fling this thing around like a fighter in a furball.’

‘Then let’s hope he doesn’t need to show off his skills,’ I said, assimilating this latest piece of news as calmly as I could. So, Amberley had her own starship. Well, it wasn’t that surprising, I suppose, inquisitors need to get where they’re needed as fast as possible. It simply hadn’t occurred to me before now, probably because the first time I’d met her she’d been with a rogue trader, and since then I’d somehow assumed she just used the

authority of her office to commandeer a vessel whenever she needed one.⁵²

‘That rather depends on what we find when we get there,’ Amberley said, getting to the point at last.

‘Which would be where, exactly?’ I asked, sipping the remains of my amasec, and trying to look as relaxed as possible.

Amberley gestured to Mott. ‘A mining station, on one of the lowest of the plateaux. Caractacus will explain.’ She smiled indulgently at her savant. ‘After all, he uncovered the lead we’re following.’

‘Thanks in no small measure to you, commissar,’ Mott began, in his dry pedantic voice. ‘Your request for access to the Arbites files was answered in the fullest possible fashion, and one of the items appended was the working notes of the medicae who performed the post mortem examination of the psyker who attempted to assassinate you.’

‘I thought you’d already seen the autopsy report?’ I asked Amberley, and she nodded.

‘Of course. Keesh passed it on as soon as it was completed, and there was nothing in it to help us, or so it seemed at the time. What Caractacus has been looking at, though, is the data the report was compiled from, and it seems the medicae missed something significant out of the final summary.’

‘Deliberately?’ I asked, and Amberley shook her head, her blonde hair sweeping across her shoulders.

‘Probably not. Keesh is investigating, of course, but it looks like a genuine oversight.’

‘Quite understandably, too,’ Mott put in. ‘There were merely trace amounts, barely detectable, and our medicae colleagues could hardly have been blamed if they’d missed them entirely. That they did not was the greatest good fortune, even though they failed to realise the importance of the discovery.’

‘Traces of what?’ I asked, suspecting I was going to regret prompting the savant for an answer. Luckily, however, the question seemed to be specific enough not to have triggered a quincunx of random associations.

‘There were minute particles of dust in the cadaver’s lungs,’ Mott said. ‘All quite normal, of course, but a few showed unusual characteristics. Cross-referencing them with the geophysical data of Periremunda, it became quite obvious to me that he had to have visited one particular plateau in the relatively recent past.’

‘Where there’s a mining station,’ I said. I nodded thoughtfully. ‘Isolated,

self-contained, a long way from civilisation. What would he have been doing there?’

‘That’s what we’re going to find out,’ Amberley said. ‘Keesh tried the subtle approach, voxing to ask for their personnel records, but no one’s answering.’

‘I see.’ I nodded again, the palms of my hands beginning to tingle in earnest. On a world like Periremunda, regular contact with other population centres was vital, and any isolated outpost would be certain to have backup systems to deal with a simple vox failure. ‘Does this interesting mining camp have a name?’

‘Hell’s Edge,’ Amberley said, grinning happily.

‘Sounds delightful,’ I said, looking around the compartment for the decanter of amasec.



FOURTEEN

I have to concede that, if nothing else, Hell's Edge lived up to its name. I've seen less inviting places in a century or more of rattling around the galaxy, but damn few of them, and even fewer when no one was shooting at me. For one thing, as Amberley had said, the plateau was one of the lowest on the planet, which meant that it was pretty much on the margins of habitability. As we disembarked, the hot, thick air seared my lungs, and I hastily tied my sash around my face as a makeshift breathing mask, feeling a faint pang of envy at the thought of the cool recycled air inside Amberley's power suit.⁵³ As well as being viscous and clogged with grit, the air was rank with the stench of brimstone, which was hardly surprising considering where we were.

As Pontius brought the shuttle swooping low over the thin stalk of vertical rock I'd tensed involuntarily, reminded of far too many combat drops, and of our precipitate arrival on Simia Orichalcae thanks to a lucky shot by an ork with a portable rocket launcher. This time, however, no flashes of light strobed from the ground to greet us, and as we banked around for another pass I got my first proper look at our destination.

'I can see how it got its name,' I said dryly. The massive outcrop on which the colony stood was perched on the bank of one of the equatorial lava flows, a thick soup of dully glowing liquid rock lapping around its base on the better part of three sides. Pipes and other manmade excrescences ran down the flanks of the plateau, apparently disappearing beneath the surface of the lava. I pointed them out, and Mott nodded thoughtfully, his augmented synapses flooding with related information at the sight.

'The flow here is rich in a number of metals, which can be readily extracted in their molten state,' he began. 'Normally the difficulty would lie

in filtering the useful material from the magma in which it's suspended, but the peculiar conditions here make that task considerably easier. Of particular interest is the manner in which...'

Ignoring the rest of the monologue, I looked out over the surface of the plateau. It was small by the standards of most of those I'd seen. Although I'd only set foot on Hoarfell and Principia Mons so far, I'd caught sight of several of the others from the air, and nothing as small as this had seemed to support a community of any significant size. Hell's Edge was no more than a kilometre across in any direction, and the largest open area I could see was the inevitable landing field. Roughly the size of a scrumball pitch, it would just about take a heavy lift shuttle if it had to, although a dirigible mooring mast at the far end indicated that most of the processed material would be leaving at a rather more sedate pace for a final destination somewhere else on the planet.

Like its grown-up cousin in Darien the landing field sprawled up to the edge of the plateau, but in this instance with no sign of a wall or fence to guard against an incautious misstep. Picturing a plunge of two or three kilm into a pool of molten rock, I shuddered, and determined to remain well away from the brink. The rest of the surface was covered with buildings, mainly manufactoria of one sort or another that I took to be the processing plants where the useful material was extracted and cast into ingots, storage facilities for the blocks of cooled metal, and a scattering of hab units.

'Anything on the vox?' I asked, as we clattered down the ramp together, Rakel keeping as far away from Jurgen as she could, and most of us with guns in our hands. Jurgen carried his beloved melta, of course, his standard issue lasgun slung across his shoulder, the all-pervading stench of brimstone robbing me of my usual method of keeping track of his whereabouts. I scanned the desolate ground around us, alert for any signs of ambush. Amberley shook her head, grimaced as the tainted air hit her nostrils, and sealed her helmet.

'Nothing,' she said. 'Pontius is continuing to scan, but there's no signal traffic this side of Aceralbaterra.'⁵⁴ To my unspoken relief our pilot was doing a good deal more than that, keeping the shuttle's engines idling just in case we needed to beat a hasty retreat. There was no point in unshipping the Salamander; comforting as I would have found its armour plate and heavy weapons right now, there was simply nowhere to go in it.

'That pretty much rules out a vox problem,' I said, little firecrackers of

paranoia chasing themselves around my synapses every time I thought I caught a glimpse of a moving shadow.

Pelton nodded in agreement. 'We should have seen a welcoming committee by now,' he concurred, following my example, and hastily converting his bandana into a makeshift facemask. A moment later Zemelda followed suit, her green hair tumbling in untidy profusion, almost as disordered as Pelton's blond thatch, as she removed the strip of cloth restraining it. Jurgen simply ignored the foul air stoically, as he did most sources of discomfort, although being an iceworlder he undoubtedly found the place even more unpleasant than the rest of us did.

'We should,' I agreed, hefting my laspistol in sweat-slick fingers (apart from the augmetic ones, of course, which at least allowed me to keep a tight enough grip on it to aim properly), and wishing I'd had the foresight to jettison my greatcoat while I'd had the chance. Despite the stifling heat, thin chills of ice water seemed to be chasing one another down my spine. There was no sign of life here at all, which meant something was terribly wrong. 'How many people are supposed to be here?'

'Two hundred and thirty-seven,' Mott said, his voice apparently unaffected by the heat and dust. Like Yanbel, he seemed to have been insulated from the worst effects of the environment by his array of augmetic enhancements, while Rakel and Simeon just seemed too out of it in their respective fashions to care, but that was nothing new. 'A hundred and ninety-six employees, forty-one ancillary staff, and eighteen dependants, of which seven are still minors.'

'Then where the hell are they?' Simeon gripped his shotgun with whitening knuckles, his paranoia rising along with his chemically enhanced alertness.

Rakel shook her head vehemently. 'All gone, no one home.' It came out in a childish singsong, and I bit back the obvious rejoinder. After all, it wasn't her fault she was barmy, and this was hardly a good time to be irritating Amberley. Instead, I made my voice as calm as possible, hoping I might prise a little more sense out of her that way.

'What do you mean, gone?' I asked, and she glared at me as though I'd just mistaken her for a joygirl and offered her a credit.

'Not here, idiot. Don't you speak Gothic?'

Well, there was obviously no point getting into a slanging match with a loon, so I just shrugged and let it go, trying not to notice the grin on

Simeon's face or picture the one on Amberley's.

'We'll split up,' the inquisitor said, her voice still remarkably calm in my comm-bead, although I suppose it's easier to ignore the possibility of a sudden ambush if you're clumping around inside a couple of centimetres of ceramite. (Not that it does to get too complacent even then. I've seen genestealers ripping Terminator armour apart like Jurgen with a plateful of shellfish, both of which are sights I'd rather not see again.) A black and gold arm rose with a faint whine of servos. 'Flicker, take Rakel, Simeon and Zemmie and check out the hab blocks. Anything at all out of place, vox me a description of it, and wait for the rest of us to arrive before you start poking around.'

'Got it.' The former arbitrator nodded once. 'Don't worry, boss, I'm not about to trip any booby traps, or start prodding Chaos sigils with a stick.'

'Good.' Amberley's voice held a faint hint of amusement. 'Rakel should be able to pick up any psychic residue, so you're unlikely to blunder into anything like that without warning, at least.' She turned to the rest of us. 'Everyone else with me. We'll start in the processing plant.'

'We could cover more ground if we split into pairs,' Zemelda suggested diffidently, a glance at Pelton indicating which partner she had in mind for herself. Amberley shook her head, the gold-chased helmet rotating smoothly on its bearings.

'No,' she said. 'I want everyone in teams large enough to deal with anything unexpected we might stumble across. Yell for help at the first sign of trouble, and run like frak if you have to. Dead heroes are no help to me.'

'Yes, boss.' Zemelda nodded, and fell into place at Pelton's shoulder. After a moment Simeon and Rakel followed, and the four of them began making their way towards the hab units, exploiting whatever cover they could find on the way. Pelton seemed confident enough in his own leadership, and he and Simeon kept their advance covered with an efficiency my years attached to the Imperial Guard had left me well able to appreciate. Zemelda was doing her best to imitate them, and to my surprise showed every sign of being able to give a good account of herself once the shooting started. Rakel, of course, just slouched along, her eyes as unfocussed as usual, either confident enough in her prediction of lifelessness not to fear any enemy presence or too bonkers to care if she was wrong.

'Come on.' Amberley turned towards the nearest industrial block. 'Let's go and see if we can find out where all the people went.'

‘If they really have gone,’ I said, angling myself to keep the bulk of her power armour between me and a row of pipe-festooned gantries any halfway competent sniper would have leapt at the chance to hole up in. ‘How much can you trust Rakel on something like this?’

‘She’s pretty reliable,’ Amberley reassured me, before undercutting the effect by adding ‘usually’. Getting a sudden blast of my aide’s distinctive aroma, even through the all-pervading stench and the sash around my face, I nodded, the reason for her caution now clear. ‘She does seem pretty definite.’

‘For once,’ Yanbel said dryly. The nearest processing plant was a few score metres to our left, and we made straight for it, angling towards a pallet of dull metal ingots stacked on a motorised trolley on the fringe of the landing field. My only thought at first was to use it as cover. It was only as we got closer that a nagging sense of wrongness about it began to worry at my subconscious.

‘What’s this doing here?’ I wondered aloud. ‘Shouldn’t it be in one of the warehouses?’

‘It certainly shouldn’t be parked out in the open,’ the tech-priest confirmed. ‘All this dust and ash in the air will degrade the motivator units. It’ll need stripping down and re-consecrating, that’s for sure.’ He shook his head. ‘The engineers shouldn’t have been that negligent.’

‘Maybe they were expecting to get it straight back inside,’ Jurgen volunteered, his habitual expression of vague bafflement mirroring my own behind its makeshift mask.

‘Makes sense,’ I agreed. ‘If they were bringing the ingots out to load in a shuttle...’

‘We’d have seen a shuttle,’ Amberley pointed out reasonably. Her burnished helmet, its decoration dulling already beneath a thin veneer of pale grey ash, turned, taking in the sight of our Aquila squatting in the centre of the pad, most definitely alone. I shrugged.

‘Maybe the people went with it?’ I suggested, not believing my own words for a moment.

‘Most interesting.’ Mott ran a finger through the patina of volcanic fallout on the edge of the pallet, and held it up to his face. I almost expected him to taste it, but he just squinted at it for a moment before wiping the digit clean on the hem of his robe. ‘Judging by the depth of accumulated detritus, and assuming a uniform rate of deposition, this conveyance was abandoned

approximately five days ago.'

'Not just abandoned,' I said. I'd reached the driver's seat, little more than a thinly padded shelf next to the control lever that seemed to govern direction and speed. Ash was accumulating in jagged rents torn into the fabric, and although it was hard to be sure under the thin grey coating, some dull brown residue seemed to make splash patterns against the backdrop of stacked metal bars. 'That looks like blood.'

'It is,' Amberley concurred after a moment, no doubt spent consulting the enhanced senses built into her power suit. Jurgen prodded the gashes in the seat with the barrel of the melta.

'Bit big for a gaunt,' he said. 'Lictor, you reckon?'

'It's possible,' I said, having recognised the distinctive pattern of talons in the slash marks. Despite the furnace heat of this desolate place, my blood ran cold. None of us had any doubt that we'd found the reason Hell's Edge had fallen silent, but an even more disturbing possibility kept insinuating itself into my mind. I turned to Amberley. 'Can Rakel detect 'nids as well as 'stealers?'

'I assume so,' Amberley said, which wasn't exactly the resounding reassurance I'd been hoping for. 'She says she can feel the shadow of the hive fleet, but we've never faced a swarm on the ground together before.' Her voice altered slightly, taking on the timbre of command. 'Flicker, stay alert. We've found signs of tyrannid activity.'

'Confirm that,' Pelton voxed back. 'We're inside the hab units. No sign of anyone, but plenty of personal effects. It's as if they all just got up and left.'

'Look out for any signs of battle damage,' I put in helpfully. 'If the 'nids have hit the place, they're bound to have left traces of some sort.' I tried to picture ten score civilians mounting any kind of effective resistance to an onrushing swarm of scuttling death, and dismissed the possibility at once. They'd all have been slaughtered within moments, their corpses devoured on the spot, or dragged off to be broken down into raw biomass for the hive fleet.

'Eew!' Zemelda's voice broke in suddenly, her disgust audible in the wordless syllable. 'The floor here's covered in bugs. All dead.'

'Fleshborers,' I said, my guess confirmed. Realising she wouldn't have a clue what I was talking about, I went on to explain. 'Ammunition from their guns. They shoot these little insect things that eat their way through you. Luckily they die almost at once.'

‘Mucoid,’ Zemelda said, which I took to be an expression of revulsion, and a perfectly understandable reaction under the circumstances.

‘Quite,’ Amberley agreed dryly. ‘Keep looking, and stay alert.’

‘Got it,’ Pelton confirmed.

Since the pallet-shifter wasn’t going to tell us anything more we moved on towards the manufactorium we’d originally been heading for, Amberley leading from the front, which was fine by me. I trotted behind her, feeling the need to show willing, and reflecting that at least that kept her heavy bolter between me and any trouble that might be lurking up ahead, while Jurgen stuck close to me as always, his melta tracking steadily as he swept his eyes back and forth in search of any threat to our wellbeing. The savant and the cogboy trailed in our wake, Mott prattling endlessly about tyranid anatomy and physiology, and bemoaning the fact that the ubiquitous scattering of ash had obliterated any tracks that might have let him estimate their numbers and subspecies, while Yanbel glanced at our bleak surroundings as though wondering what an Omnissiah-fearing servant of the Machine-God was doing in a place quite so untidy as this.

I don’t mind admitting I’d felt uncomfortably exposed during our trek across the landing field, and a sense of relief began growing in me as soon as we reached the main portal of the manufactorium. Intellectually, of course, I knew that the ’nids could be lurking in ambush just as easily within as out here in the open, but my primitive hindbrain equated inside with safety, and I hurried through the gaping metal doors after Amberley as quickly as I could.

The air inside was surprisingly clean, and I wound the sash from around my face with an exquisite sense of relief, despite getting a full-strength blast of Jurgen’s halitosis in the process. The vast hall was astonishingly quiet, the complex machinery filling it shut down completely, although who had done so, and why they would have taken the time to deactivate them in the middle of a tyranid attack, was beyond me.⁵⁵

‘What’s this?’ Jurgen asked, prodding what looked like a random accumulation of scrap metal scattered around the floor with the barrel of his melta. Yanbel scooted over to join him, the wheels on his feet apparently working a great deal better in here than in the thick layer of dust outside, and apparently indifferent to the thickening miasma that was beginning to surround my aide now that we were being spared the worst of the brimstone. He picked up the nearest piece of twisted orichalcum, and

examined it carefully, nodding to himself.

‘Biometric relay.’ He scooped up another piece of metallic detritus. ‘Lymphatic interface link.’ He nodded decisively, sure of his conclusion. ‘It’s a servitor, or it was, before something ripped out all the sanctified parts.’

‘Or spat them out,’ I said, feeling distinctly uncomfortable at the thought. Something had consumed the biological components of the melded flesh and metal construct completely, picking the non-organic parts clean in the process.

‘Probably.’ Amberley’s voice was still steady, although I thought I could detect an undercurrent of uncertainty in it that was far from reassuring. ‘But the ’nids are only of secondary importance right now. We’re here to look for evidence of a Chaos cult, remember?’

I nodded soberly. The chitinous horrors were at least a known quantity, however perturbing their presence, but whoever had sent the rogue psyker after me wasn’t, and we couldn’t afford any more surprises that might undermine our ability to defend this world. If there was any indication at all to be found here of who the mysterious assassin had been, and who had sent him, uncovering it had to be our main priority.

I activated my comm-bead. ‘Pelton, find anything yet?’

‘A whole lot of nothing,’ the former arbitrator told me cheerfully. ‘If there really was a Chaos cult hiding out here, it was the most Emperor-fearing one I’ve ever come across.’

‘What do you mean?’ Amberley asked, and Pelton’s voice instantly became more businesslike.

‘We must have checked out thirty accommodation units by now, icons of the Emperor in all of them. Devotional pamphlets and lives of the saints in going on half. If there were any Chaos worshippers here, they must really have liked living dangerously.’

‘Are miners usually that pious?’ I asked. I hadn’t met that many, of course, but somehow I doubted it. On the other hand, I could readily appreciate how living in a place like Hell’s Edge might incline someone to invoke the Emperor’s protection with a little more enthusiasm than usual.

Amberley shook her head. ‘I don’t know. I’ll look into it.’

We pressed on, passing through a labyrinth of mechanisms larger than a Chimera, the purpose of which I couldn’t even begin to guess at, our voices and Amberley’s resonant tread echoing around us as we moved.

‘What the frak?’ I asked, taken by surprise as we rounded the corner of one such mysterious device, and a stinking waft of sulphurous air washed over me. At first I thought that someone must just have left a door open, then as my eyes focussed again after filling with water as the rank smell punched its way into my sinuses, I realised the truth. A hole had been blasted through the thick rockcrete wall, large enough to drive our Salamander through, littering the floor with chunks of detritus in the process. I glanced at Amberley. ‘I think we’ve found a bit of that battle damage I mentioned,’ I said.

‘Me too,’ Jurgen confirmed, as constitutionally immune to sarcasm as always. He eyed the breach appraisingly. ‘Someone’s taken a couple of heavy bolters to it. Melta too, by the look of things.’

‘Not something you’d normally expect to find in a civilian facility,’ Amberley agreed, clanking forward to examine the breach more closely.

Yanbel nodded, taking in the scene with whatever augmented senses lay hidden beneath his cowl. ‘Someone was certainly desperate to get in,’ he remarked.

As he spoke the memory of the violated Mechanicus shrine I’d found in the Valley of Daemons on Perlia rose to the surface of my mind, and I nodded too, my mouth going dry. Then the thought dissipated almost as soon as it had come, as something about the pattern of debris forced its way out of my subconscious and into my forebrain.

‘Desperate to get out, more likely,’ I said. ‘The damage was inflicted from this side of the wall.’

‘You’re right.’ Amberley nodded in turn, putting the picture together in her own mind, and glanced around the high, echoing chamber. We’d made our way to this point by a series of zigzags, keeping as much of the machinery as possible between ourselves and any wide open space where a ’nid swarm might mass. I’d seen the value of channelling them into narrow firelanes, where they could only come at you a few at a time instead of taking full advantage of their numbers to overwhelm you, often enough to have followed Amberley’s lead in this without argument, although I must admit to having kept my eyes open for ambushing ’stealers or the like as we’d followed our winding path through the thickets of ironmongery. Now she took a few paces back from the gaping hole in the wall, and pointed. ‘Thought so. Look.’

I joined her, the others clustering round too, and glanced in the direction

she was indicating. A wide, clear corridor between the banks of hoppers, control lecterns, riveted iron, and Emperor knew what else stretched from where we were standing to the doors by which we'd entered, through which I caught a comforting glimpse of our shuttle still sitting patiently on the pad. Rather less comforting was the condition of some of the machinery bordering the open area. Scorch marks and dents abounded, and in a few places holes had been punched clean through the thick metal plate.

'Bolters,' I said, recognising the pattern left by the explosive armour-piercing projectiles, and Amberley nodded sombrely.

'Flamers too, by the look of it,' she said, indicating a wide, scorched area on the floor, about twenty metres beyond where we stood.

As I took a step towards the nearest damaged machine, intending to examine it more closely for some clue as to what had happened here, something on the floor crunched beneath my bootsoles. I glanced down, with a shiver of apprehension, already certain of what I was about to find. The carcasses of tiny beetles, too many to count (although no doubt Mott could have given me a reasonable estimate of their numbers if I cared enough to ask), were scattered everywhere I looked. 'Fleshborers,' I said unnecessarily.

Amberley nodded tightly. 'It's pretty clear what happened here,' she said, and I nodded too, concurring with her assessment. Someone had been attempting to leave the building, and found their way blocked by a swarm of onrushing gaunts, too many to fight through even with the impressive amount of firepower they'd clearly had at their disposal. So they'd laid a temporary barrier of blazing promethium, buying enough time to blast their way through the wall behind us in order to escape.

'Whoever fought their way out of here was impressively well equipped,' Mott said. 'I would estimate that, judging by the impact patterns left on the machinery surrounding us, at least half a dozen bolters were employed in addition to the heavy weapons, the traces of which are all too obvious.'

I felt another shiver work its way down my spine. 'That sounds like a fully-equipped Astartes squad!' I said in horrified astonishment. A dreadful possibility began nagging insistently at my forebrain. 'Could the witch have been in league with one of the Traitor Legions?'

'I doubt it,' Amberley reassured me. 'Their presence tends to be rather more obvious.'

'Skitarii, perhaps?' Yanbel offered. That sounded plausible. I nodded,

recalling again the crimson-garbed bodies of the Mechanicus foot soldiers littering the hidden laboratory on Perlia.

I looked at Amberley again. 'Does Lazurus have a bodyguard with him?' I asked. I couldn't imagine any other reason why a squad of skitarii would be on a planet as far from the major warp lanes as Periremunda.

'Not that I'm aware of,' she said.

Jurgen coughed loudly, and hawked a gobbet of phlegm into a corner. 'Besides,' he said, as though the point was obvious (which I suppose it was as soon as he'd verbalised it), 'the clockwork soldiers carry hellguns, don't they?'

'Usually,' I agreed. I'd seldom seen one with a bolter, that much was true. 'And what would they be doing in a midden like this in the first place?'

'That's what we're here to find out,' Amberley said. After a moment she turned, and began plodding deeper into the complex. 'They must have come from this direction.'

Well I could have told her that, of course, there was only one obvious avenue of approach to the point where the battle with the tyranids had occurred. Further speculation would be pointless, however. The only way to find out who the mysterious warriors were, and what they were doing in Hell's Edge, would be to find out where they had come from. With a rising sense of foreboding I took a tighter grip on my laspistol and set out after her, hoping that the answers we sought wouldn't have to be paid for in blood.



FIFTEEN

We found it after another half an hour or so of poking into corners and, in my case at least, jumping at shadows, wondering if a lictor was about to leap out on us from some place of concealment, its jaws slavering, but we were all still uneaten when Amberley paused in front of a section of wall that looked to me like any other, and regarded it quizzically.

‘Nice work,’ she said, then without warning she drew back her power fist and punched a hole clean through the solid rockcrete partition, revealing a thin metal lining beyond. After a moment or two she’d enlarged the breach to a ragged hole, and shouldered her way inside, dislodging a small cascade of rubble as she stepped over the uneven lip of the gap she’d made. After a moment, sure the place had been abandoned, she popped the seal of her helmet, apparently intent on examining the place with her own eyes.

Yanbel and Mott followed, bounding over the obstruction easily with their augmetic legs, and after a moment’s hesitation I scrambled awkwardly after them. There was, after all, safety in numbers, even if that just meant keeping the sage and the cogboy between me and a hungry ’nid. Jurgen followed, of course, manhandling his clumsy heavy weapon through the hole with his usual expertise and a deal of *sotto voce* profanity, but I had little attention to spare for my aide’s travails. I was too busy standing in dumbstruck astonishment, like some hick from the sump getting his first look at an uphive trading post.

The chamber we’d found ourselves in was much smaller than the halls full of machinery that we’d been labouring though until now, but no less choked with the Omnissiah’s bounty for all that, data-lecterns and cogitator banks lining the bare steel walls, and arcane mechanisms I couldn’t even begin to guess the purpose of littering the floor in a fashion that seemed both

functional and virtually random. Yet again I was reminded of the hidden laboratory I'd stumbled across on Perlia, and the grisly secret it had concealed, but this place was mercifully devoid of eviscerated corpses to mar its air of pristine functionality.

Picking my way carefully over the rat's nest of cables linking everything together I went to join Amberley and Yanbel, who were discussing our discovery in hushed tones. They both seemed as surprised as I was at what we'd found, which I wasn't quite sure how to take. On the one hand it dispelled the conviction that had been growing in me from the start of this little jaunt that everyone else in the party (apart from Jurgen, of course) knew a great deal more than I did about what was going on, but on the other I'd been deriving a certain amount of solace from the assumption that at least Amberley was on top of things, and the idea that she was as far out of her depth as I felt hardly seemed reassuring. So, as usual in this sort of situation, I just adopted an air of calm self-confidence, and tried to make sense of what they were saying to one another.

'It certainly looks as if he's been here,' Yanbel agreed, a trace of doubt still audible in his voice. He gestured to the analytical engines surrounding us. 'This is the kind of equipment he'd need to continue his researches, no doubt about that. But why would a mining colony be hiding him?'

'Emperor alone knows,' Amberley said, a trace of asperity entering her voice, 'but he must have gone to ground somewhere away from the main population centres, and why else would all this stuff be here?' A faint whine of servos underlined a sweeping gesture, which nearly took the tech-priest's head off. 'It's got his presence written all over it!'

'Metheius, you mean?' I asked, being able to add two and two as quickly as the next man, and Amberley turned to look at me with a faint air of surprise, as if she'd forgotten I was there.

'It's beginning to look that way,' she said.

'I'll see what I can recover from the cogitators,' Yanbel said, 'but don't hold your breath.' He moved away, and started the ritual of data retrieval at a nearby lectern.

Mott coughed diffidently. 'This chamber appears to have been abandoned at the same time as the rest of the facility,' he pointed out, 'and in something of a hurry, too.' He gestured towards the door to the hidden chamber, clearly visible on this side, a metre or so from the makeshift one Amberley had so thoughtfully provided us with. 'I can see a genecode

scanner and an intrusion alarm linked to the access point, both of which whoever left here last neglected to set.'

'I imagine they had other things on their minds,' I pointed out dryly, 'what with the whole place swarming with 'nids and all.' I should have known better, of course. Mott nodded thoughtfully.

'That's highly probable,' he conceded. 'Given the human brain's response to abnormal levels of stress, particularly in a life-threatening situation, I would have thought it extremely likely that the individuals in question had no immediate goal beyond simple survival. On the other hand, the residue of the skirmish we found would seem to indicate that they were extremely resourceful, and highly motivated—'

'Quite,' Amberley said, cutting him off before he could bore us all into a coma, 'but that still doesn't tell us who they were.'

'The records have all been wiped,' Yanbel reported from his station at the data-lectern, his tone clearly adding a non-verbal 'I told you so', and I nodded slowly.

'Just like Perlia,' I said. Whoever had been here clearly didn't intend coming back, but then given the circumstances in which they'd left, that was hardly a surprise. Amberley nodded grimly.

'Search this place thoroughly,' she said, then grimaced at me. 'I can't believe I just said that. It's not as if we'll find the *shadowlight* just lying around the place, but we'd better make sure before we go. I don't want to give Lazurus the chance to claim we frakked up.' She activated the vox-unit built into her suit. 'Flicker, we've found a bolthole. Looks like Metheius has been hiding out here.'

'Are you sure?' Even over the vox-link, the incredulity in Pelton's voice was palpable. 'Why would a tech-priest be consorting with psykers?'

'I've no idea.' The edge of irritation in Amberley's voice was growing again. 'When we catch up with the gretch-frotting boltbag and put him to the question you can ask him, all right?'

'Fine, boss.' Pelton's voice was conciliatory, which was hardly surprising under the circumstances. Hacking off an inquisitor isn't among the brightest of things to do, even if you work for her. 'We've got you on auspex, be with you in five.' The link went dead, and Amberley sighed, glancing at the tech-priest with a faintly apologetic air.

'Sorry about the boltbag remark,' she said. 'It's getting to be a rather stressful day.' Of course it was about to get a great deal more so, but at that

point, mercifully, we were all still blissfully ignorant of the fact. Yanbel glanced up from the lectern, still muttering prayers and tapping keys in the hope that he might be able to coax a shred of forgotten data back into existence, but Metheius had known the system well, and had evidently covered his tracks just as skilfully as he'd done in the Valley of Daemons so many years before.

'No offence taken,' he assured her, no doubt reflecting that a servant of the Omnissiah was supposed to be beyond such petty reactions as annoyance, even if the tone of his voice hinted otherwise.

'Pelton does have a point, though,' I ventured cautiously. 'Even if Metheius is a renegade, would he really be associating with a Chaos cult? Those loonies are about as far from the ideal of the machine as it's possible to get.' Amberley sighed deeply, and appeared to count to ten under her breath.

'In my experience, enemies of the Emperor take whatever help they can get. Maybe he traded them the weapons for a place to hide.' I nodded in a conciliatory fashion.

'That sounds reasonable,' I conceded. It still didn't sound right to me. I would have thought a mere handful of bolters would hardly be sufficient inducement to provide a facility as lavishly equipped as this, but she was the expert, and if her fuse was getting shorter I didn't want to be the one to press the detonator.

'I'm getting movement on the auspex,' a voice cut in on the vox, and after a moment I recognised it as Pontius's. It seemed our pilot had been doing more than just putting his feet up while we'd been strolling around Hell's Edge admiring the scenery. His intonation took on a trace of puzzlement. 'North-west sector. That's on the lava side.'

'Back to the shuttle! Move!' Amberley's voice took on the ring of command, no doubt drawing exactly the same conclusion as I had, and, to my inexpressible relief, reacting in exactly the same manner as I would have done (though no doubt from far nobler motives than mere self-preservation.)⁵⁶'Flicker, get your team aboard now! Pontius, get ready to lift!'

'Powered up and ready for dust-off,' the pilot assured her, while Pelton acknowledged the change in our plans in a few terse words. Pausing only to rip the now obvious door off its hinges, Amberley led the way back through the labyrinth of corridors and idle machinery towards the open air at a pace

that left me gasping in the warm and foetid air. I wasn't about to lag behind, though, having more than an inkling of what we would find waiting for us on the surface of this barren spur of rock, and knowing all too well that to be trapped inside the building would mean certain death.

At length, however, we entered the echoing hall by which we'd first entered the complex, and the breach in the wall left by our mysterious predecessors gaped ahead of us, the stench of brimstone getting stronger all the time as we approached it. Without pause or hesitation Amberley swung off to our left, making straight for the wide open doors, the welcome silhouette of our Aquila waiting patiently for us beyond them.

As we left the shelter of the building the tainted air punched me in the chest, gouging its way into my lungs. Amberley sealed her helmet at once, but there was no time to waste tying a rag around my face again.

I glanced around, taking in the scene surrounding us, instincts honed on battlefields throughout the segmentum kicking in and assessing the immediate threat. Pelton's group had almost made it back to the shuttle, double-timing it as though Horus himself was after them, little puffs of grey dust being kicked up by their hurrying feet, and their weapons at the ready. Simeon was clearly in full combat mode, his movements preternaturally quick, his head snapping around in all directions so violently I half expected it to come clean off his neck and begin rotating like the auspex sensoria of a command Chimera.

It was hard to be sure over the shriek of our Aquila's engines and the constant low rumble of the geothermal activity, but I thought I could hear an ominous scuttling sound away to our right, and turned my head to face the main cluster of industrial buildings. As I did so a flicker of movement caught the corner of my eye, almost hidden by the clouds of noxious fumes drifting from the fumaroles littering the ground beneath our narrow spire of rock.

'Simeon, five o'clock high!' I shouted, barely in time, but his reactions were boosted to preternatural levels by whatever foul alchemy was polluting his blood and he turned faster than I would have believed possible, bringing up his shotgun as he did so. The flat boom of it echoed across the open landing field, and a ball of something cartilaginous, trailing tentacles like some languid aquatic invertebrate, burst messily in midair, spraying some sort of loathsome ichor all around itself. Where it hit the thin carpet of ash the ground sizzled, exuding foul fumes. An instant later

another pair of detonations echoed from the buildings ranged around us, as two more of the vile constructs exploded into oblivion without finding targets of their own.

‘What the hell was that?’ Zemelda asked, her voice understandably a little shriller than usual.

‘Spore mines,’ Amberley replied tersely, clearly not wanting to waste any more time in idle conversation.

‘Some kind of bio acid, by the look of it,’ Mott added helpfully. ‘Fortunately every one in a cluster tends to detonate at the same time, which means they’re relatively easy to guard against if one remains sufficiently alert—’

‘Duck!’ I snapped at him, cracking off a shot with my laspistol, which took out another deadly balloon swooping at his head. Once again the rest of the swarm went off with it, sending a few shards of something hard and dangerous-looking pinging off Amberley’s armour and making the rest of us flinch.

‘And that would appear to be a form of frag analogue.’ Mott sounded no more than mildly intrigued by our close brush with death. ‘I’d need an intact specimen to examine to be sure, of course, but my guess would be that the outer shell consists of small segments of chitin, bonded together with cartilage, or perhaps muscle fibres—’

‘Shut up and run,’ I suggested, suiting the action to the word, and not a moment too soon. The sight I most dreaded, a heaving mass of chitinous armour and razor-sharp talons, was bearing down on us from the direction of the manufactoria, so dense and so shrouded in the dust being raised by innumerable claw-edged feet that it was virtually impossible to tell where one malevolent life form ended and its neighbour began.

‘Keep an eye out for the larger ones,’ I counselled, breaking into a sprint towards the distant shuttle. ‘If you can take them down the swarm will lose cohesion.’

‘Fine idea in theory,’ Pelton said, his team taking whatever cover they could in the shadow of the boarding ramp, and beginning to shoot enthusiastically in the general direction of the approaching tide of talon and mandible. ‘Picking them out might be a bit more difficult, though.’ He was right, of course, but that was hardly helpful. The mass of chittering predators was bearing down on us like a tsunami, the fusillade of covering fire from the direction of the shuttle, welcome as it was, seemed about as

effective as lobbing pebbles. The horde of nightmarish creatures carried on scuttling towards us at a rate that would have seemed impossible had I not seen it with my own eyes all too often before (and run like a startled sump rat too when I could, but that's beside the point).

On the other hand the swarm was so densely packed that there could be no question of missing, even at a range so extreme that normally there would be no chance at all of acquiring a target. Following our comrades' lead we began shooting too, pouring lasbolts and explosive projectiles from Amberley's heavy bolter into the middle of the scuttling swarm; to no real effect if I'm honest, but it took no extra effort and made us feel better (if that were possible under such dire circumstances). Jorgen's melta might have made a difference, I suppose, but if he'd stopped running long enough to fire the cumbersome heavy weapon he'd have been gaunt chow for sure within a second. Why he didn't just ditch the thing and un-sling his lasgun I have no idea, but that was Jorgen for you, once he'd got an idea stuck in his head that was that (and lucky for us too, as things turned out).

'They're not going to make it!' Zemelda said, an edge of panic beginning to enter her voice, which was hardly helpful, I thought, although it was hard to disagree with her. The horde of slavering killing machines was hideously close now, a front line of hormagaunts bounding clear of the pack, their scything claws extended eagerly to rend our flesh as they leapt towards us. The termagants behind them were moving a little more sedately, and my bowels spasmed at the sight of their fleshborers swinging towards us, taking clear aim in our direction. Behind them a larger silhouette loomed, rending claws and a deathspitter ready to do their deadly work, but the real danger the warrior form represented was its ability to focus the will of the hive mind, co-ordinating all these disparate creatures into what amounted to a single entity, fixated on our destruction.

'Pontius,' Amberley said, with what I thought was a surprisingly pettish cast to her voice considering the peril we were in. 'If you're *quite* ready?'

'Just waiting for you to get a little closer,' the pilot responded calmly, and I felt a sudden flare of hope. The Aquila's primarily a workhorse, of course, but it's also a mainstay of the Navy auxilia. Amberley's might look like a standard civilian model, but that was no guarantee that it was unarmed, as I'd assumed from its external appearance. Almost as soon as the thought had formed, concealed gunports slid smoothly aside to reveal the welcome silhouettes of twin lascannons, flanking the stubby snout of the sturdy little

shuttle. 'Targets coming into optimum range... now.'

The lascannons spat their heavy bolts, smashing into the onrushing tide of chitinous death, felling half a dozen of the vile creatures in an instant, but the rest came on with undiminished fury.

'Flicker! Board now!' Amberley snapped, and with a final volley that actually succeeded in downing another couple of gaunts, which were promptly mashed flat by the onrushing horde behind them, Pelton's team scurried up the ramp to safety. My lungs burning, and my feet slithering in the thin drift of ash, I pounded towards the blessed sanctuary offered by the Aquila's hold, intent on nothing more than reaching it alive. The lascannons fired again, reaping another bountiful harvest of tyranid flesh, but as always the relentless monstrosities came on regardless, indifferent to their own losses.

'Hurry!' Zemelda was hovering at the top of the ramp, sending laspistol bolts whining around our ears, her commendable desire to help somewhat diminished by the reflection that she could well end up doing the 'nids' work for them. Yanbel and Mott clattered up the incline to join her, and I flinched as a volley of fleshborer bugs missed me by centimetres, spattering off the portside landing skid, where in the absence of anything to devour they twitched feebly and expired.

'Still with you, commissar,' Jurgen reassured me, pausing on the lip of the ramp to turn and aim his melta. My own bootsoles rang on metal at last, and I turned to see what had happened to Amberley.

It wasn't good. The warrior directing the swarm had evidently determined that she was the greatest threat, and concentrated most of their ranged fire against her power suit. The intricate engraving had been scored by a myriad of tiny abrasions where innumerable fleshborer and deathspitter shots had struck, mercifully without finding a weak spot that would allow their living ammunition to work their way inside, but they'd clearly been chewing away at the armour's joints. She was moving stiffly now, more slowly than she had been, and the bolter on her arm had expended all its ammunition. A crowd of hormagaunts was pressing her hard, their scything claws scoring visible rents in the ceramite beneath the ornate decoration on the surface of the suit, and once again the image of the Reclaimer terminators being ripped to shreds aboard the *Spawn of Damnation* rose to the surface of my mind. These were no 'stealers, of course, but their sheer weight of numbers was beginning to tell, and it could only be a matter of time before they

found a weak point and managed to get at the woman inside.

A second later, to my vague astonishment, I found myself moving into the attack, my laspistol picking off the nearest of the biological constructs as my trusty chainsword left the scabbard, howling like one of the tyranids themselves as its teeth bit deep into chitin, and my boots crunched once again in the carpet of volcanic ash. What was uppermost in my mind then, I honestly couldn't say. I'd like to believe that, just for once, my innate pragmatism had been outweighed by the affection I felt for her, but I'm bound to admit that it had also occurred to me that Pontius wouldn't get the Aquila off the ground until Amberley was safely on board it, and every second we delayed was another chance for the tyranids to cut me down too.

'Jurgen, the big one!' I shouted, blessing the fact that the warrior seemed to be holding back, content to let the cannon fodder wear Amberley down before it closed for the kill itself. My aide nodded, and, forewarned, I closed my eyes for a moment as the actinic flare of the melta burst like a second sun a few metres to my left. When I opened them again the warrior had vanished, along with a handful of its attendant minions, to be replaced by a few gobbets of steaming meat and a stench of charred flesh that even managed to punch its way through the all-pervading stink of Hell's Edge.

'Nicely done,' Amberley said, ripping a gaunt's head off with her power fist. I disembowelled another with my chainsword, and the swarm surrounding her fell back, all sense of purpose draining away. I dispatched another with a quick las-bolt to the thorax, and they began to break, scuttling away in the manner of their kind when the controlling influence of the overmind is removed. Amberley followed me back up the ramp, and into the welcoming bowels of the shuttle. 'Pontius, you can lift when ready.'

'Very well, ma'am.' The note of our engines deepened, and the ground began to fall away beneath us. The survivors of the swarm were heading for the corner of the plateau by which they'd entered it, and glancing down through the gap left by the closing ramp I just had time to catch a brief glimpse of a narrow isthmus of rock stretching across the lava flow before the thick slab of metal slid smoothly into place. No doubt that was how the swarm had been able to cross the lake of liquid rock and surprise us. Amberley discarded her helmet with a hiss of breaking atmosphere seals.

'Thank you, Ciaphas,' she said, shaking her hair free. 'I thought I was in trouble there for a moment.' I shrugged, still unsure of my motives and

uncomfortable with her gratitude, which I felt I didn't really deserve.

'Glad to help,' I said, taking refuge in the pose of modesty that had served me so well for so many years, and she smiled at me with what looked like genuine affection. Fortunately I was spared any further awkward exchanges by Yanbel, who scooted forward to examine the armour with an audible intake of breath.

'You won't be wearing this for a while,' he said, shaking his head. 'I'll need to strip it down completely, bless the components, and Omnissiah alone knows where I can find a new fluid link this side of the Gulf.'

'I'm sure you'll do your best,' Amberley said, shrugging her way clear of the breached exoskeleton and stretching gratefully, in a manner that showed off her skin-tight bodyglove to considerable advantage. She smiled at me again, and led the way through the bulkhead to the lounge.

'I don't know about you,' she said, reaching for the decanter, 'but after all that excitement I could do with a drink.'

'I thought you'd never ask,' I replied gratefully.

'What I don't understand is how they knew we were there,' Zemelda said, dropping into a nearby seat, and staring out of the viewing port. The survivors of the swarm had scuttled down the face of the plateau with their usual alacrity, and were already almost halfway along the narrow causeway they'd crossed to reach us. Pontius swung the shuttle round a few degrees, and hovered in place.

'They must have seen the shuttle land,' I said. 'They're bright enough to know that our arrival meant more people to consume, so they sent out a small scouting swarm to finish us off. After taking the miners so easily they wouldn't have expected us to be as well armed as we were.'

Amberley nodded, sipping her amasec with every sign of satisfaction. Below us the narrow spine of rock disintegrated under the impact of a fusillade of lascannon shots, and the remaining 'nids vanished under the lava flow, flaring briefly into patches of greasy smoke as they did so.

'They're building up their biomass reserves,' she said. 'Now the hive fleet's in range they'll be creating an army to consolidate their beachhead, and pave the way for the main invasion force.'

I felt a faint chill of dread as I pondered the implication of her words. 'That means they'll strike again,' I said. 'Raid more settlements.'

Amberley nodded grimly. 'I'm afraid you're right.' She drained her goblet, and poured another drink, a large one. 'Hell's Edge was only the

beginning.'

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Editorial Note:

Cain, of course, doesn't bother to expand on the consequences of this development for the planet as a whole, or for the campaign to defend it. I have therefore appended the following extracts from other sources, in the hope that they will go some way towards filling in the gaps in his narrative.

From *Periremunda Today: The News That Matters to Your Planet*, 264 933 M41

**TERRORISTS ARE XENOS INFILTRATORS!
KEEP WATCHING THE SKIES!**

In a startling announcement, endorsed by no lesser eminence than Lord General Zyvan, commander of the Imperial Guard heroes charged with eradicating the taint of un-mutual deviance from our fair world, Arbitrator Keesh today revealed the shocking truth that the campaign of terrorism that has rocked Periremunda for so long has an even more sinister purpose than simply challenging the benevolent rule of the Emperor's divinely appointed regents. Far from being mere traitors and heretics, a crime that in itself deserves no less than utter annihilation and eternal damnation, the perpetrators are something even more foul: the changeling offspring of the vile xenos species known as genestealers, which taint the pure bodily essences of the Emperor-fearing, thus perverting them to the cause of the world-devouring tyranids.

Though one of the dreaded hive fleets is reported to be on its way to Periremunda, all true human citizens may take heart from the knowledge

that so is a taskforce drawn from the very cream of the Imperial Navy, and the redoubtable warriors of the Imperial Guard, which between them is more than powerful enough to obliterate the cancer of the xenos presence from our blessed corner of the galaxy. Moreover, we still have the unceasing vigilance of Commissar Cain and his valiant comrades-in-arms to protect all true followers of the Emperor.

As for the xenos-tainted vermin still lurking among us, let them tremble in fear, knowing that their inevitable extermination is naught but a matter of time.

IS YOUR NEIGHBOUR A GENESTEALER?
20 WAYS TO TELL!
(See page 7)

Transcript of an address by Planetary Governor Merkin W. Pismire the younger, 266 933 M41

My fellow Periremundans, it's with a heavy heart that I address you all tonight. Um, unless you're in a different time zone, of course, when I guess you'll be having breakfast. Or sleeping, or whatever. Erm...

By now you'll all have heard what's really been going on for the last few months, and no doubt you were as surprised as I was when I first saw the news pics this morning. Um, that's to say my daughters saw them, and lost no time in bringing me up to speed. Um...

You may all rest assured that I voxed Arbitrator Keesh as soon as I became aware of the situation, and demanded a full report, which, I'm sure, will prove extremely reassuring as soon as it arrives, or the young man I spoke to has time to pass on the message.

Anyway, I can state quite confidently that things are completely under control. We've all heard these silly rumours about low altitude settlements suddenly losing contact with the rest of the planet, and I'm quite sure there's no truth to any of them. It's probably just these genestealer scallywags spreading scare stories to undermine our morale.

I mean, if the enemy was already here in force, I'm sure I'd know all about it. My staff are pretty good at keeping on top of the important stuff.

So goodnight, and Emperor bless you all. You can rest assured that everything that can be done will be done.

Erm... How was that? Gubernatorial enough? Or should we go again?

Err... What do you mean, it was live?

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SIXTEEN

Amberley was right, of course. Over the next two days we lost contact with another seven outposts, all of them situated among the lowest altitude and most marginally habitable of the plateaux, which at least meant that relatively few people had vanished into the maw of the tyranids,⁵⁷ to be used as the raw material for spawning another generation of their hideous kind. That raised a whole new set of questions, of course.

‘You must have some idea of where their digester pools are,’ I said. I was sitting in Kasteen’s office, along with the colonel, Major Broklaw, and a portable hololith, in which the disembodied heads of our counterparts from the other regiments on-planet flickered uneasily, orbiting Zyvan’s face and upper torso like cherubs round a high-ranking ecclesiarch. There was still no sign of the hive fleet, or our promised reinforcements, and, under the circumstances, ordering the senior command staff to Principia Mons for a face-to-face briefing would have been the height of folly. Zyvan shook his head.

‘We’ve been looking, believe me, but the sandstorms are still blocking too many of our orbital imagers, and our recon flights haven’t turned anything up either. By the time we’ve established the loss of another settlement and sent a response team in, the wind has obliterated any tracks that were left in the desert.’

‘The commissar does have a point though,’ Kasteen put in, backing me up loyally, even if that did mean coming perilously close to sounding as though she had doubts about Zyvan’s strategy. ‘On Corania they clustered round the pools, depositing the dead they’d collected and spawning new creatures. Bombing from the air while they were vulnerable made a big difference, and denied them reinforcements. For a while at least.’

‘I quite agree,’ Zyvan said, ‘and the minute they’re located, our ships will commence an all-out bombardment from orbit. It’s the only way to be sure of eradicating them.’ He permitted himself a wintry smile. ‘One thing you can say for this place, we won’t have to worry too much about collateral damage.’

Several of the faces around him nodded in agreement, and I recognised a few from the Gravalax campaign a couple of years earlier, whose names I’d never caught. Kasteen and Broklaw were looking vaguely cheered by the remark as well, and I’m bound to say I appreciated the point as much as they did. Despite our best efforts we’d put quite a dent in the planetary capital there, and it had gone against the grain to be killing and maiming so many of the civilians we were supposed to have been protecting. (Although, to be fair, a good half of the ones who didn’t turn out to be ‘stealers were rabid xenoists who would have sold us out to the tau in a heartbeat, so I suppose we weren’t hurting nearly as many loyal subjects of the Emperor as we might have done.)

‘That’s some comfort, at least,’ I said, taking shameless advantage of my position to consolidate the good opinion he evidently still had of me. After leaving Hell’s Edge behind us, Amberley had ordered our pilot to head straight for Principia Mons, where we’d lost no time in briefing the lord general about what we’d found in the ill-fated settlement. (The ‘nid presence, at any rate. She never said a word about the hidden laboratory, and I knew better than to raise the subject myself.)

Zyvan had been as courteous a host as before, politely ignoring the fact that we were both as malodorous as Jurgen (other than offering us the use of his bath, which was more like a swimming pool with soap, and sending my uniform out to be cleaned while we ate), and asking a number of pertinent questions about the numbers and types of organisms that had attacked us, which I did my best to answer. My input had evidently proven satisfactory, as he’d gone so far as to shake my hand when Jurgen and I had departed to meet the courier shuttle he’d ordered to meet us at the aerodrome.

‘Can’t we at least narrow it down?’ Kasteen asked, worrying at the point she’d raised like a kroot with a bone. ‘We know where they’ve struck, and at roughly what times. Surely we can estimate where the swarms are originating from.’

‘Our analysts have been trying to do just that, of course,’ Zyvan said, nodding in approval, and clearly grateful for having at least one regimental

commander to hand with some idea of what we were facing.⁵⁸ 'Unfortunately it seems that the settlements the 'nids have hit are scattered right across the planet, and given our best knowledge of how fast they can move, the timing isn't consistent with the activities of a single swarm.'

'More than one.' Broklaw added something under his breath that the lord general pretended not to have heard. 'Can you at least give us some idea of how many we're dealing with?'

Zyvan shook his head. 'Our best guess is at least three distinct swarms,' he said heavily, provoking a flurry of consternation among his halo of floating heads, 'but that's just going by the number of raids we've discovered so far. We're also assuming that the swarms are sufficiently numerous to have sent out more than one group of organisms at a time, and that each pack has already created a digester pool to process the biomass they're harvesting.' I noted the euphemism with faint surprise. Zyvan had always struck me as fairly blunt in his mode of expression, a personality quirk he was renowned for, and I hadn't expected him to shy away from the fact that it was the corpses of slaughtered civilians he was talking about.⁵⁹ 'If they haven't begun digesting the material they've collected after all, and are simply consuming it for energy, then we're looking for a greater number of randomly roving swarms with no focus for their activities beyond finding the next pocket of life on this benighted globe and snuffing it out.' He shrugged, clearly thinking he might as well give us all the bad news in one go. 'If the worst case estimate turns out to be the right one after all, we're going to find five of the damned things running around loose out there.' That provoked further consternation among the hololithic heads. 'Assuming there haven't been even more raids we don't know about yet, of course. That could revise the numbers even further upwards.'

'Emperor on Earth,' Kasteen said, her face pale even for a Valhallan.

I nodded judiciously. 'It makes good tactical sense,' I said. 'The hive fleets often infiltrate an advance force, to tie up the defenders before the main assault begins, and this planet's tailor-made for them to do just that. They could be pretty much anywhere, while we're deployed in a few major population centres, waiting for them to come to us. We daren't spread ourselves any thinner, either, which leaves the majority of the plateaux completely undefended.'

'Apart from the local PDF garrisons,' an eager young commissar I didn't recognise pointed out. He was assigned to one of the Harakoni regiments,

and his uniform cap was embellished with one of the blue feathers commonly affected by veterans of a grav chute combat drop, so he clearly wasn't the sort to either shirk his duty or feel he was too grand to ignore the traditions of the troopers he served with. Despite his air of puppy-like enthusiasm, which reminded me disconcertingly of Lieutenant Sulla, the keenest and most irritating of our platoon commanders,⁶⁰ I was inclined to listen to the lad. 'Are any of them sufficiently reliable to deploy?'

'The arbitrator informs me that roughly two-thirds of the PDF regiments are now believed to be free of genestealer infiltration,' Zyvan said dryly. 'How well founded that belief is, however, remains to be seen; and of course the loyalty of the Gavarronian militia has been personally vouched for by the Canoness Eglantine.' The faint pause before he continued said all he needed to about that particular assurance. 'So I suppose we can expect most of them to mount some kind of effective resistance when push comes to shove.'

'Sounds like Keesh has been busy,' I said, surprised and relieved to hear that so much of the PDF had been effectively purged in so short a time.

Zyvan nodded. 'Apparently his office has received a great deal of first-hand intelligence gleaned during a series of raids on hidden 'stealer nests,' he said. Realising who had carried them out, and the wisdom of circumspection in this regard, I returned the gesture.

'Then let's hope his sources are accurate,' I said, knowing full well that they were.

'Indeed,' Zyvan replied, diverting matters on to safer ground with as much finesse as a diplomat. 'If they are, we'll have a fighting chance of holding on until our fleet arrives.'

'Assuming the hive fleet doesn't get here ahead of them,' the Harakoni colonel put in, and I was pleasantly surprised to notice the young commissar nodding in agreement. A realist as well as a populist, maybe he was going to turn out to be one of those rare examples of our calling who don't end up dying heroically on the battlefield leading from the front, or taking a las-bolt in the back from a disgruntled trooper goaded once too often with the threat of execution or the lash.

'That might depend on how many of the unpurged regiments turn out to be loyal after all,' he pointed out reasonably.

'Then we'll have to hope that it's most of them,' Zyvan said. 'I'm deploying them in the outer defensive perimeters in any case.' Where our

artillery could drop shells on them at the first sign of treachery, and the 'nids would be into them first regardless. Selling that to the high command of the local forces wouldn't be an easy or pleasant job, and I didn't envy whoever had got it. But there were enough bright, eager scions of the Imperial aristocracy whose families had bought them commissions cluttering up Zyvan's general staff for him to be irritated by one of them on an almost daily basis, and I had no doubt that a suitable candidate had made himself obvious at just the right moment. (The obvious solution, assigning the whole pack of them to the front line somewhere, where if the enemy didn't take care of them their own men probably would, didn't seem to have occurred to him, nor would it, in all the years we were destined to serve together.)⁶¹

'If it's the splinter fleet I encountered in the Desolatia system,' I said, more to remind everyone who the real hero was supposed to be around here than because I thought it was strictly relevant, 'it will be relatively weak. Our warships killed around seventy percent of its vessels before they could escape into the warp, and we dealt with the 'stealers on Keffia and Gravalax⁶² effectively enough to prevent it being summoned there. It's been over a dozen years, I admit, but I doubt it's found enough to consume in the meantime to regain much of its strength.'

'Quite so.' Zyvan nodded in agreement. 'Where the tyrannids are concerned nothing can be certain, of course, but it does seem likely that this is the same fleet.' He smiled mirthlessly again. 'I'd certainly prefer to believe that it's the only one in this part of the galaxy.'

'Then we should be able to hold out,' I said, nodding judiciously, and trying to sound more certain than I felt. 'For a few days, at least. It's already weak and wounded, and our reinforcements should be able to finish it off for good.' That's always a pretty tall order when you're dealing with 'nids, of course, they pop up again just when you think it's all over with a persistence even a necron would envy, but it was what everyone needed to hear, and the expressions and voices of everyone in the link became a lot more confident and decisive after that.

'All we need now is a strategy for holding out,' Broklaw remarked, as though this would be nothing too difficult, and Kasteen nodded her agreement.

'We'll need to be ready for rapid deployment, so we can get stuck into them wherever they appear.' The familiar self-confident smile was back on

her face now that her old fear of the 'nids had been replaced by a genuine conviction that we could win. 'At least requisitioning enough shuttles won't be a problem on a world like this.'

'The commerce commission will raise merry hell about it,' Zyvan pointed out, with enough of a grin lurking behind his beard to make me suspect that another young subaltern with razor-sharp creases in his uniform and an unfortunate tendency to irritate the lord general was about to have his diplomatic skills tested to the limit. 'But they can frak off to the warp so far as I'm concerned. We've a war to win, and if they don't want to help us do that, they can sit outside the perimeter and bitch about it to the 'nids.'

'We can't defend everywhere,' Broklaw pointed out. 'Even if every regiment becomes air mobile, it'll take time to respond to an attack.'

'Precisely,' Zyvan said, 'which is why we're implementing a strategy of phased reinforcement.' He smiled, looking more relaxed than he had done since I'd left him in earnest discussion with Amberley the evening before to return to Hoarfell. 'Not unlike the way the Guard responds to an attack on the Imperium itself, as it happens, but on a much smaller scale, of course.'

'I'm not sure I follow,' the young commissar said.

'It's fairly straightforward,' Zyvan assured him. 'When the 'nids attack a populated plateau, the local PDF garrison will respond, and report the situation. Reinforcements from the nearest plateaux with PDF garrisons will start arriving at once, giving the nearest Guard regiment time to put its own rapid response force into the air.'

'That should work,' I agreed. If nothing else, it would buy Keesh's people a little more time to evacuate the civilians, and the PDF gaunt fodder should at least slow down the 'nids long enough for the real soldiers to get there. All in all I couldn't think of a better plan, although if I'd realised Zyvan was inadvertently setting me up for another attempt on my life, no doubt I'd have been a good deal less sanguine about it.



SEVENTEEN

For the next couple of days Zyvan's strategy seemed to be working. So far as we could tell the 'nids were still confining their depredations to the lowest lying and most sparsely populated plateaux, as our analysts had anticipated, and I have to confess to finding that curiously reassuring, Hoarfell being neither of those things. That wasn't to say that we were at all complacent about the possibility of an unexpected attack on our own position, of course: the one thing we all knew from experience was that the scuttling horrors were nothing if not unpredictable, and Kasteen kept the regiment on high alert in case a lictor or a purestrain 'stealer brood had somehow managed to sneak onto the plateau despite our vigilance.

Apart from that unnerving possibility, of course, there was the constant looming threat of the hive fleet to worry about. Though its advent was expected hourly it still seemed in no hurry to arrive, which was fine by me, as once it emerged from the warp we could expect the entire planet to be blanketed in spores and battle to be joined in earnest wherever we happened to be.

The one piece of good news was that we didn't have any more guerrilla attacks by 'stealer hybrids to worry about, the security precautions we'd imposed in the wake of the fuel tanker incident apparently proving enough to prevent them from re-establishing a presence in Darien, although hitherto unsuspected broods were emerging elsewhere around the planet to commit acts of sabotage aimed at undermining resistance to the swarms. I heard little from Amberley during this tense interlude of sporadic fighting, her attention apparently entirely taken up with rooting out the cancers in our midst, or following up whatever leads she'd discovered in Hell's Edge that might lead her to the missing tech-priest before the tyranids found him first

(or Lazurus and his team managed to locate him, which she seemed to regard as almost as bad).

Keesh hadn't been idle either. He and his justicars were attempting to evacuate the settlements deemed most at risk from the tyranid swarms roaming the desert, relocating the populations of the lowest plateaux to higher and safer ground (at least until the hive fleet turned up, and 'safe' ceased to have any meaning other than a large metal box with a lock on it), a strategy which, in addition to saving countless lives, would also deny the invaders the resources they needed to increase their numbers. It was a massive undertaking, though, and all too frequently the dirigible fleet arrived too late at some luckless community to find nothing of it remaining beyond the kind of desolation we'd discovered in Hell's Edge.

While all this was going on, the regiment was getting its first taste of action against the chittering nightmares that continued to besiege us. Several of our platoons had been airlifted to bolster the sagging resistance of the PDF when the 'nids moved against towns or industrial zones large enough to be worth defending, and, I'm pleased to say, had given a good account of themselves in the process, despite the trauma of facing their most dreaded foe once again.⁶³

Of course the more successful we were at evacuating the smaller colonies the more we were forcing the 'nids to mass their forces against larger, more vital targets, so in retrospect I suppose each victory we gained was somewhat pyrrhic, merely forcing us into another more desperate battle within a matter of hours, but the grim statistics of attrition seemed to be marginally in our favour. There was no doubt in my mind that we were making the tyranids pay for every centimetre of ground they gained in ichor. Any other foe would at least have been given pause by the pounding they took, but true to type they took no more notice of their own casualties than we would of an expended power cell. Nevertheless, just as we would have been handicapped by a shortage of ammunition, every hole we blasted through their ranks represented a marginal degradation of their ability to fight, and our policy of burning every 'nid corpse we could recover (to say nothing of our own) denied them the opportunity of replenishing their ranks. If the hive fleet that spawned them hadn't arrived when it did, I suspect, we might even have been able to force our advantage past the tipping point, and succeeded in cleansing them entirely from the surface of Periremunda unaided.

That didn't happen, of course. The fleet did arrive, along with our own reinforcements, and the focus of the campaign shifted to a more conventional system-wide engagement, where the battle in space became as important as events on the ground. (At least so far as the official record goes. The events I was to become involved in could well have changed the face of the entire galaxy, although just how far-reaching they were I'd have no idea until decades later, at the turn of the millennium, when Abaddon's insane assault on the heart of the Imperium began.)⁶⁴

But I'm getting ahead of myself. What I meant to be talking about was the day all hell broke loose, my shadowy enemies made another attempt to kill me, and I discovered far more than I ever wanted to know about the true nature of the Holy Inquisition.

It all started innocently enough, although in my experience it usually does when I'm about to be pitched yet again into mortal peril and bowel clenching terror. I'd been hanging around our command centre, trying, like everyone else, not to look as though I was staring at the hololith for the first sign of the hive fleet emerging from the warp, and discussing our state of readiness with Kasteen. So far we'd deployed four platoons in support of the PDF, and they'd all returned in high spirits, despite the inevitable casualties they'd taken.⁶⁵ I complimented the colonel once again on her decision to practise the anti-tyranid tactics the veterans among us had learned at so great a cost on Corania, and she nodded gravely.

'It seems to be paying off,' she conceded. I glanced at the status board. Second company was on standby for rapid deployment at the moment, a couple of platoons already sitting out at the aerodrome waiting for a vox message to pile into the transport shuttles we'd requisitioned, along with a couple of civilian pilots who seemed less than thrilled to be hopping in and out of war zones pretty much on a daily basis, but understandably disinclined to argue with an awful lot of people carrying guns. The dropships from our troop carriers would have been preferable, of course, but in the nature of things there were far fewer of those to go round than there were regiments demanding their use and our position on Hoarfell made us a low priority. Zyvan had decided that the company-sized transports would be better employed shifting troopers who were nearer to the enemy (which meant more of them could be plucked to safety if things went seriously ploin-shaped, but of course no one would have been tactless

enough to mention that to the civilian authorities). I nodded approvingly.

‘We’ve got by far the best survival rate of any of the Guard regiments,’ I said, which happened to be true. The Harakoni had taken a real mauling that morning, and I’d found myself wondering briefly how their young commissar had fared. I didn’t even want to start thinking about the PDF. There was no doubt that Zyvan’s strategy was effective, but it left under-trained and ill-equipped militia units holding the line against the tyranid horrors until the real soldiers could get there, and there was no doubt at all that the price they were paying was a heavy one. If the peculiar topography of their home world hadn’t made it impossible I’ve no doubt that many more of them would have broken and run than actually did.

Since they had nowhere to go in any case, and were fighting for their homes and loved ones, which I’ve observed time and again will make even the meekest civilian stand his ground like a Terminator, they remained at the front, and died in droves. Even allowing for our own people’s remarkable ability to engage the chitinous nightmares and emerge unscathed, these battlezones sounded extraordinarily unhealthy places to be, and I resolved to stay as far away from them as I could, at least until the spores started falling, and I couldn’t avoid the ’nids wherever I was.

Luckily no one had challenged my assertion that my place would be at the regimental headquarters when that ghastly prospect occurred (where, of course, I’d have a full company of troopers to hide behind), and that traipsing off on one of these periodic hit-and-run raids made it all too possible that I’d be wrapped up in what amounted to a glorified skirmish when the sky started falling. From years of practice I’d managed to sound a little wistful as I’d pointed this out, contriving to give the impression without actually saying so that I’d have liked nothing better than to charge off to face an endless tide of malevolent chitin, but my sense of duty was strong enough to override such a selfish impulse, leaving me no alternative but to skulk around our heavily fortified compound drinking tanna and generally getting underfoot while the troopers got on with defending the civilians like they were supposed to.

‘So far,’ Kasteen said, looking around us, her expression dour. Whatever doubts she might be feeling, this was no place to discuss them. The command centre was swarming with men and women going about their regular duties, and we both knew morale wasn’t going to be helped if they got even an inkling that the senior command staff was less confident of our

ultimate victory than we appeared. By mutual, unspoken agreement we began to walk towards the staircase leading up to the gallery where her office was. 'But we still have to face the hive fleet. That's going to be a very different game.'

'True,' I said, standing aside to let her mount the stairway first, 'but our reinforcements can't be far behind them.' My attention was quite pleasantly distracted for a moment by the callipygian spectacle ascending past my eye level, and as I placed my foot on the lowest tread I couldn't help tilting my neck back a little to continue appreciating it for a moment longer.

Minute as it was, that movement was to save my life, as without it I'm sure I'd never have noticed the faint flicker of motion high in the girders supporting the roof. My first thought was that a bird of some kind had entered the vast enclosed space through the massive doors at the far end, which, as usual, had been left open to admit a howling draught and the occasional flurry of snow so essential to the Valhallan notion of wellbeing. That didn't seem terribly likely, though, as the constant noise would have prevented any self-respecting avian from roosting comfortably, and if there was such an intruder it would almost certainly have left some trace of its presence on the room below. The palms of my hands began to itch, and, mindful of my recent experience with the psyker assassin, I craned my head for a better view, wondering where the hell Jurgen had got to now that I really needed him.

'There's something in the rafters,' I said, drawing my laspistol, and trying to focus on the faint impression of movement in the shadows over our heads. Kasteen glanced up too, and reached for her sidearm. Around us I could see little ripples of alarm and consternation, most of the troopers on vox and auspex duty glancing at the lasguns resting against their control lecterns. Whatever the thing was, it was small, and I found myself reminded all too vividly of the spore mines that had attacked us in Hell's Edge.

'I see it too,' Kasteen said grimly, aiming her bolt pistol. Then her gaze skittered off to one side. 'And another one.'

'Arm yourselves!' I called, although the advice seemed somewhat superfluous by now, all the troopers I could see with a weapon having them to hand already. Then, as if suddenly becoming aware of our scrutiny, the mysterious intruders swooped to the attack.

'What the hell?' Kasteen said, surprised, as they came into view for the first time. An echelon of servo skulls, five in all, was dropping towards us,

and her aim wavered indecisively. She turned to a loitering enginseer, his face predictably blank beneath the cowl of his Adeptus Mechanicus robe, and glared at him. 'Who let those things in here?'

'They're nothing to do with us,' the tech-priest assured her, in the level voxcoder drone of so many of his kind. Something whirred behind his eyes, as he appeared to focus on something the rest of us couldn't see. 'The idents don't match any of the local Mechanicus shrines—'

Whatever else he might have been about to tell us was lost in the sudden bark of what sounded like a bolt pistol, and his torso disintegrated in a shower of blood and shrapnel, which no doubt had been part of his augmetic systems before the explosive projectile had rearranged them. I returned fire at once, and I wasn't the only one. Every trooper in the hall who could grab a weapon opened up on the macabre intruders like a bunch of drunken aristos on a shooting party who'd just caught sight of a flock of widgeon. The skulls were hellish fast and agile, though, jinking through the barrage of lasbolts like those flying platter things the tau use when they've got more sense than to stick their own heads over the parapet. Only one went down, smacking into the rockcrete floor with enough force to shatter bone and weapon alike.

'Keep firing!' I shouted unnecessarily, and the troopers complied with a will. I scurried into cover behind the staircase just in time, another couple of bolter rounds exploding against the metal mesh where I'd been standing an instant before, while Kasteen, her retreat cut off, sprinted upwards to the gallery, shooting as she went. She didn't manage to hit anything, but the stray rounds from her bolt pistol punched a constellation of miniature stars in the roof of the command post, and the leading skull veered away from the fusillade of explosive projectiles.

I expected at least one of the swarm to turn on the colonel now that she was exposed on the narrow walkway outside her office, even though she'd ducked behind the balustrade to take as much advantage of the available cover as she could, but they all ignored her, dropping past the level of the mezzanine, and with a thrill of horror I realised that every single one of them was heading straight for me. Indeed, if it hadn't been for the sheer volume of fire making them evade as they came, they would have been nose to nose with me by now. (Well, strictly speaking none of them had noses any more, but you know what I mean.)

There'd be plenty of time to worry about what it all meant later. Right now

my priority was survival, and I studied the airborne assassins carefully, searching for any kind of weakness. Two of them appeared to have bolt pistols built into them, the barrels protruding grotesquely from between their teeth like inside-out suicides, and if they hadn't been forced to dance around to make themselves harder to hit, with the inevitable deleterious effect on their own accuracy, I have no doubt that I'd have shared the fate of the luckless engineer. A third had a chainblade humming away beneath it, apparently in the fond hope that its gun-slinging brethren would have been able to keep me busy long enough for it to part more than my hair, while the fourth seemed to be completely unarmed for some reason.

That was the one. If it wasn't carrying a weapon, it had to be there to direct the others. Taking careful aim I steadied my arm against the metal of the staircase, thankful yet again for the augmented fingers that let me hold my laspistol more firmly on target than even the most skilled duellist could have managed, and squeezed the trigger.

To my immense relief the shot struck home, and the bone casing shattered, spilling lumps of auspex gear and the sensorium array attached to it across the floor. By some strange freak of chance the tiny antigravity unit that had kept the skull aloft shot upwards, still functioning and no longer weighed down by its payload, to shatter one of the skylights over our heads and vanish into the thin grey murk that kept Hoarfell almost perpetually wrapped in its chilly embrace. Looking up after flinching instinctively away from the shower of broken glass rattling against my refuge, and the flurry of snow that followed it, I tried to acquire another target, only to find the specimen with the chainblade swooping at my head.

I reacted at once, drawing my chainsword by reflex, not even consciously aware that I was doing so until I'd batted the thing aside. It bounced off one of the girders supporting the gallery, an ugly gash along its jaw where my blade had bitten deep into the bone. By sheer luck I seemed to have severed the power cable leading to its lift unit, and it lay inert on the rockcrete, buzzing angrily and attempting to saw its way through the floor, until a couple of troopers put it out of its misery with a flurry of well aimed lasbolts.

The two gun-skulls hovered uneasily, apparently unsure of their target now the hunter unit that had led them to me was out of commission, and so many other people in the vicinity were popping off rounds at them. After a moment of frantic bouncing around, which enabled them to avoid

vaporisation by something approaching a miracle, they suddenly turned and shot upwards, disappearing through the hole in the skylight.

‘Someone really seems to have it in for you,’ Kasteen remarked, descending the staircase again, somewhat gingerly as she tested the treads where the bolts had struck. ‘First an invisible psyker, and now this.’ She stared at me quizzically, the curiosity she was too polite to express openly all too visible on the faces of the troopers surrounding us. Suddenly becoming aware of their scrutiny, she gestured abruptly to the nearest non-com. ‘Sergeant, get this mess cleaned up.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ He saluted smartly, and began rounding up everyone who hadn’t taken the hint and found urgent business back at their assigned station quickly enough. ‘You and you, get a body bag. The cogboys’ll probably want to organise some kind of send off for Sparky, so we’d better keep him fresh.’ It seemed our erstwhile engineer had been popular enough among the troopers to have acquired a nickname, which vaguely surprised me. Struck by an afterthought, the sergeant called the solemn faced troopers back as they turned to comply. ‘Better get a mop as well, he’s leaking a bit.’

‘They’re determined, all right,’ I said, replying to Kasteen. I glanced at the hole in the ceiling through which the automated assassins had fled, an uncomfortable thought forcing its way to the forefront of my mind. ‘They must be to have found a way through our security here.’

‘We’ll find out how they managed it,’ the colonel assured me grimly.

I nodded, trying to look calm and analytical. ‘No doubt we will,’ I said, ‘but those things can infiltrate almost anywhere.’ Come to that, the ones that had retreated could come back for another go pretty much whenever they felt like it. My only option seemed to be to get the hell out of there before they rallied and tried to complete their programmed assignment, and as I glanced around the command centre the perfect bolthole seemed to present itself. ‘Whoever’s behind these attempts on my life must know I’m here, and they could try again.’

‘Let them,’ Kasteen said, as though looking forward to taking out another would-be assassin in person. ‘I’ve no objection to helping traitors commit suicide.’

I smiled, in a self-deprecating manner. ‘I appreciate the sentiment, Regina, but you’ve got far more important things to worry about than ensuring my safety. Our overriding priority is the defence of this planet, and another

attack on our headquarters could undermine that, perhaps fatally.' I paused, timing it just long enough to underline the seriousness of our responsibility. 'I'm not willing to risk compromising the operational effectiveness of the regiment just to keep myself out of harm's way.'

'What have you got in mind?' Kasteen asked, no doubt impressed by my dedication to duty, and veiling her concern behind a thin façade of brusque efficiency.

I gestured towards the status board I'd noticed before. 'We've got two platoons sitting out at the aerodrome. I'll go and join them for the time being.' Whoever sent the servo skulls could turn our headquarters upside down searching for me, so far as I was concerned. Chances were they'd never think of looking among such a small detachment, and even if they did, I'd still have around a hundred troopers to hide behind.

Kasteen nodded slowly. 'Makes sense,' she conceded. She paused. 'Anything else we can do before you leave?'

'Get a complete pict record of those servo skulls,' I said, indicating the debris of the battle, 'and have it downloaded to a data-slate. I'll take it with me when I go.'

'I see.' Kasteen looked thoughtful. 'Do you really think you might be able to get some idea of where they came from by examining the pict?'

I shook my head. 'No,' I said slowly, 'but I know a woman who can.' After all, it was her fault in the first place for sticking me in front of the pictcasters, and giving every halfwit insurrectionist on the planet the impression that I was gunning for him in person, so it only seemed fair that she keep them off my back now. I was right too, this would all turn out to be a result of her activities on Periremunda; but in a manner which, at the time, I couldn't possibly have guessed.



Editorial note:

The following, mercifully short, extract fills in a brief elision in Cain's own account of events. After some deliberation I've decided to include it purely for the sake of completeness. Readers preferring to skip it are at perfect liberty to do so, if not actively encouraged.

From Like a Phoenix on the Wing: The Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101 M42

It will come as no surprise to those readers who have followed my account of the heroic exploits of our regiment thus far to hear that the women and men under my command were as eager as ever to confront the monstrous enemy we faced, not least because our gallant comrades in First Company had already been fortunate enough to drive back the inhuman horde on no fewer than three occasions. At last, however, Second Company was placed on standby, ready and waiting to respond to the call to arms, and to our barely concealed delight Third Platoon was one of those selected to wait at the star port in Darien in anticipation of an immediate departure to wherever we were needed to deliver the Emperor's vengeance to the scuttling hordes that dared to pollute his most blessed demesne.

I would be somewhat lax in my duties as a chronicler of events, however, if I failed to admit to a degree of trepidation underlying our eagerness to engage the tyrannid swarms. For all too many of us, the last time we'd faced these vat-spawned monstrosities had been a nightmare of slaughter in which we'd lost friends and comrades in uncountable numbers, and despite the unshakeable resolve our faith in the Emperor conferred upon us the

memories of Corania remained fresh in our minds. Therefore the news that we were to be joined by none other than Commissar Cain was as welcome as it was unexpected, every woman and man of us determined to prove worthy of the leadership of so stalwart an example of the military virtues.

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EIGHTEEN

‘Fascinating,’ Lazurus said, his metallic face flickering in the portable hololith aboard third platoon’s command Chimera. I’d arrived at the aerodrome around half an hour before, no further threats to my life having manifested in the interim beyond Jurgen’s habitually uninhibited driving style. After negotiating the obstacle course of the landing field at his usual breakneck pace he’d hurled our Salamander up the loading ramp of the nearest shuttle with almost as much alacrity as we’d boarded Amberley’s Aquila, much to the consternation of the rapidly scattering troopers left on guard around the base of it.

Only as he brought us to a halt next to the Chimeras already parked in the hold, their noses angled towards the exit ramp for a rapid deployment, did I realise that their markings were those of third platoon, and my heart sank. Lieutenant Sulla was trotting across the cargo bay towards us, positively bristling with the disconcerting enthusiasm she habitually displayed at the prospect of getting into action, and I began to wish I’d told Jurgen to head for the other aircraft instead of simply getting us under cover as quickly as possible. Lieutenant Faril, the officer in charge of fifth platoon, was a good deal less impulsive, and I’d have stood a much better chance of staying in one piece surrounded by the troopers of his command. Sulla was just as likely to take it into her head to order a suicidal charge at the nearest hive tyrant as stay comfortably behind cover potting away at it from a safe distance, and for some reason the troopers under her would just follow her into the fray, screaming their lungs out like maddened orks, and probably reducing the thing to bloody chunks before it even got over its astonishment at their temerity.⁶⁶

‘Commissar.’ She saluted smartly, her narrow face, ponytail and toothy

grin making her look more like a cartoon horse than ever, positively fizzing with excitement. 'I take it your arrival here means we're about to get stuck in at last?'

'If the Emperor wills it,' I said, thinking there was never a spore mine around when you really needed one. 'There isn't much for me to do back at HQ at the moment, apart from routine paperwork, so I thought I'd tag along on the next deployment if you or Faril don't mind hauling a bit of dead weight with you.' As always I spoke with the common troopers in mind, a bevy of which had popped out of their AFV hatches, like snow weasels sniffing for predators, to see what all the fuss was about. No harm in playing up to my image of modest heroism, especially if I was hoping to keep them between me and the 'nids.

'Happy to have you,' Sulla assured me, edging away from Jurgen as unobtrusively as she could, the aroma of his presence beginning to thicken noticeably in the confined space between the parked vehicles. 'Is there anything we can do for you while we're waiting?'

'I'd appreciate the use of your command vehicle,' I said, after a moment's thought. 'I've some sensitive material to transmit to Principia Mons for analysis, and I may have to discuss it with the lord general. Obviously I trust the discretion of everyone here, but security regulations...'

'Of course.' Sulla looked even more like a pony being offered a sugar lump than ever, completely bowled over by the prospect of being involved, however peripherally, in the affairs of the high command. I've often wondered if, in the years to come, she was disappointed to discover just how tedious most of them actually were.

Anyhow, the upshot of all this was that I ended up in the platoon command vehicle, comfortably secure from prying eyes and ears, while Jurgen fiddled about with the vox-unit and brought me mugs of tanna at regular intervals. I had plenty of leisure to drink them too, as Zyvan took at least twenty minutes to track Amberley down through whatever arcane channels of communication existed between his office and the roving inquisitor, but after what seemed like an interminable wait her face appeared in the hololith, followed almost at once by Lazurus, who had apparently dropped into her hotel suite for another non-exchange of information.

'That's very helpful indeed,' the senior tech-priest said, amplifying on his original reaction, and glancing slightly to one side of the imager, where, presumably, the pict records of the servo skulls I'd transmitted from the

data-slate had just appeared. He and Yanbel had begun to pore over them as soon as they'd come through, exchanging remarks in the peculiar twittering language of their caste.⁶⁷

'Can you tell where they came from?' I asked bluntly.

Lazurus nodded slowly. 'It's merely the best estimate I can give you, of course, but judging from the configuration of the flux capacitors, I'd say that at least the hunter unit shows signs of having been manufactured on one of the forge worlds in the Hephastus cluster, around six or seven hundred years ago. I could have been a lot more precise if you'd managed to recover one of them intact.'

'I'll try to bear that in mind if they come after me again,' I said, but Lazurus merely nodded, as apparently immune to sarcasm as my aide.

'That would be helpful,' he said, 'although I wouldn't have thought that's too likely now. Having failed with the servo skulls, he'll probably try something else next time.'

'Who will?' I asked, my astonishment at finally getting something akin to a straight answer not too great for me to pounce on it like a kroot spotting a nice juicy corpse. Lazurus looked as surprised as it was possible to with only half a face.

'Metheius, of course,' he said, as though that was the most obvious thing in the galaxy. 'Who else did you think?'

'Oh, I don't know,' I said, my irritation finally getting the better of my tongue. 'The Chaos cult with the invisible psyker? A cell of genestealer hybrids? I seem to have been walking around with a target on my back ever since I arrived on this Emperor-forsaken rock, so why shouldn't your renegade cogboy join the queue?'

'He's obviously afraid we're getting close to him,' Amberley said speculatively, 'and like everyone else on the planet, he must have got the impression that you're personally co-ordinating the hunt for hidden traitors.' She shrugged, the hint of a mischievous grin quirking at the corners of her mouth. 'Just goes to show that you shouldn't believe everything you read in the printsheets.'

Refraining from pointing out whose fault it was that every subversive idiot on Periremunda was labouring under that delusion, by what I considered to be something of a heroic effort, I merely nodded curtly.

'He must have been panicking to send those things after me in the middle of our compound,' I said. 'The chances of them getting through several

hundred troopers undetected were always going to be slim.'

'He probably had no idea that's where you'd be,' Amberley pointed out cheerfully. 'Most of the pictcasts have shown you in the capital, standing around in the open, and civilians expect commissars to be with the troopers in the front line, where you'd have been an easy target for a sneak attack. Just his bad luck you happened to be in such a secure location when his little messengers caught up with you.'

'Quite,' Lazurus agreed. 'They could have been homing in on you for days.' He pointed out a lump of something metallic, fused by my las-bolt, in the corner of one of the pictcasts. 'That's a genecode scanner or I'm an ork, and I'd bet a Martian upgrade it was tuned to your DNA.' I shuddered, not entirely due to the Valhallan levels of air-conditioning inside Sulla's mobile command post. The notion of those silent assassins drifting through the skies of Periremunda, mindlessly intent on striking me down, was an unnerving one.

'So I assume there's no way of telling where they were dispatched from?' I asked, already sure of the answer.

Yanbel shook his head. 'None at all,' he said cheerfully. 'Those power packs are good for decades. They could have been sent from anywhere on the planet.'

'Wonderful,' I said, wondering how many more hitherto unsuspected factions were going to crawl out of the woodwork and take a crack at me before all this was over. At least with the 'nids things were straightforward enough: kill or be killed. I began to feel a modicum of sympathy for Sulla's uncomplicated view of things. 'I suppose you still haven't a clue where he might be hiding?'

'We're narrowing it down,' Amberley assured me, which I felt was less helpful than it might have been. After a few more perfunctory words in both directions I broke the link and wandered outside, intending to clear my head by walking around on the landing pad for a few minutes. That should be safe enough, we were too far from any reasonable cover to fear a sniper shot, and the wide open skies around our idling transports would surely prevent any more airborne assassins from sneaking up on me unobserved.

No sooner had I reached the top of the boarding ramp, though, than I found my progress impeded by Sulla, her eyes shining like a juve who'd just been asked out on a hot date by the captain of the schola scrumball team. A sense of foreboding settled itself in my stomach, like the residue of

a stale ration bar. In my experience there was only one thing that got her that excited: the prospect of imminent combat.

‘Commissar, we’ve got a go from the colonel.’ She hesitated. ‘I would have told you before, but given the sensitivity of your discussions...’

‘Thank you, lieutenant.’ I nodded gravely, while the last of the pickets from the bottom of the ramp double-timed past us, their bootsoles ringing on the metal mesh, most of them glaring at Jurgen as they passed. ‘Your discretion does you credit.’ I retuned the comm-bead in my ear, hearing Faril’s characteristically breezy tones confirming that all his people were aboard and lifting. A moment later the deck beneath my feet lurched, and a familiar falling sensation in the pit of my stomach confirmed that we too had left the ground. Jurgen’s jaw clenched in mute discomfort as he caught sight of the landing field dropping away beneath us, and then, perhaps mercifully, the rising ramp hid the vertiginous view. ‘Where are we heading for?’

‘Aceralbaterra,’ Sulla informed me, in the briskly efficient fashion of all junior officers who’ve absorbed the briefing slate and relish the chance to prove it. I’d heard the name before somewhere, and after a moment I managed to dredge the context out of the mire of my memory. Amberley’s shuttle pilot had mentioned it, during our eventful little jaunt to Hell’s Edge. I nodded, as though I’d recognised it at once.

‘That’s down near the equator, I believe.’

‘That’s right, sir.’ Sulla nodded eagerly. ‘Fascinating place, by all accounts. One of the largest agricultural zones on the planet, although it’s too low and hot for most conventional crops. Jungle everywhere, apparently, and it just keeps growing like a Catachan grotto, so there’s no point in even trying to plant fields.’

‘What do they use it for, then?’ I asked, already dreading the answer.

Sulla shrugged. ‘Grazing. The locals imported thousands of sauropods from Harihowzen, and they just roam around chewing lumps out of the vegetation. Big as Titans, some of them.’ Well, that was something of an exaggeration. I’d seen similar creatures before and most of them were barely half that size, but even allowing for an element of hyperbole the idea was enough to make my blood run cold.

The tyranids needed biomass to swell their armies, and they’d just discovered the motherlode. If Aceralbaterra fell, then Periremunda would fall right along with it. Far from finding a refuge, it seemed, I was about to

be pitched into the most decisive battle of the entire war.

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NINETEEN

Aceralbaterra turned out to be just as uninviting as Sulla had made it sound in our earlier conversation, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit to quailing inwardly as we approached it, flying low and fast to avoid the dense clouds of gargoyles flocking around the outskirts of Konnandoil, the plateau's principal settlement. Unlike the villages the 'nid swarm had hit before, Konnandoil was a fair-sized town, and as we swooped in over it I could see signs of fighting everywhere, surging tides of claw and mandible being thrown back by the dogged resistance of the defenders, or, in all too many places, being swamped by it altogether.

'There.' I pointed to a wide-open plaza, fronting the aquila encrusted façade of what had evidently once been the main Administratum building of this benighted town. It was bordered on the other three sides by a colonnaded walk, which in happier times had evidently sheltered a scattering of brightly painted market stalls from the near constant drizzle.⁶⁸ Our pilot nodded, far from happy at the prospect, but astute enough to realise that the spot I'd picked was far enough away from the main bulk of the swarm to afford him a pretty good chance of getting away again before the hive mind recognised the presence of a fresh threat and turned to meet it.

I'd prevailed on the authority of my office to install myself on the flight deck for the duration of our journey, which had the twin advantages of avoiding both Sulla and the effect that being airborne was bound to have on Jurgen's physiology. Thus it was that I had something of a panoramic view of the plateau we'd come to relieve, and was able to form a remarkably cohesive picture of it.

As I think I mentioned before, our pilot, though merely a civilian inducted

into Imperial service along with his shuttle, evidently had enough commonsense to have learned some basic survival skills. I can't claim that a Navy veteran wouldn't have been a whole lot sharper, but he did his best, bringing us in below the level of the plateau and popping up over the lip of it at the last possible second. I must admit to flinching a little as that vast spire of rock loomed closer and closer in the viewport, only to be pressed back in my seat by a sudden surge of acceleration as he tilted the nose up and shot us over the rim in an elegant parabola. Reflecting on the effect this manoeuvre would undoubtedly have had on my aide's tender stomach, and thanking the Emperor quietly under my breath that I wasn't there to hear him express his opinion of it, I glanced down, to find that we were skimming over the treetops of a jungle so lush it could almost have been Catachan itself.⁶⁹

My first impression of luxuriant foliage as far as the eye could see wasn't to last for much longer, though. A few manmade structures broke the smooth flow of vegetation, a scattering of outlying hamlets, no doubt the habitations of the hardy souls who herded and processed the sauropods that grazed on its inexhaustible abundance, and the occasional road slashing through the trees and undergrowth, but for the most part the fecund flora seemed to hold unchallenged sway.

Indeed, to my surprise, it seemed Sulla had hardly been exaggerating about its vigour. In a couple of places the highways through the jungle were already choked with overgrowth, and I began to apprehend that in more normal circumstances keeping them clear would be a constant chore. One such blockage seemed to be surrounded by servitors, hacking and burning away at the encroaching vegetation with single-minded diligence, blissfully unaware that the world had changed irrevocably around them, rendering their efforts to restore order to it entirely futile.

Then, in a second, the landscape altered completely. Great ragged gashes had been torn through the carpet of undergrowth, bare earth showing where the 'nid swarms had scoured their way through the once verdant jungle, forming an arrow-straight highway from wherever they'd clambered up the precipice straight to the heart of the town. The scattered remains of gigantic bones showed where a herd of sauropods had been too slow to escape the tyranids' relentless advance, and as we neared our destination I saw another of the luckless behemoths overwhelmed by the scuttling horde. Despite its huge size, almost as big as our shuttle, it was brought down in seconds,

engulfed by a remorseless mass of talon and mandible. Scores of the things died beneath its massive feet, or were shredded by jaws that could have bisected a Leman Russ, but the sheer number of gaunts that swarmed over it told in the end, and the gigantic creature vanished entirely within an instant, becoming nothing more than a spasmodically twitching mound of chitin, which began to diminish rapidly in bulk.

‘Emperor’s bones.’ The pilot’s face was ashen. ‘Did you ever see the like?’

‘All too often,’ I said, keeping an eye out for a suitable landing site. Remembering my duty to boost morale, and mainly to take my own mind off the ghastly sight we’d just witnessed, I gave him an encouraging smile. ‘But we’ve got more guns than the lizards.’

‘I guess.’ The pilot didn’t seem any more convinced than I was, but returned his attention to the flight controls, which was one source of worry out of the way at any rate. I began to study the approaching town a little more carefully, making a mental note of all the hotspots, and trying to form an overall view of the battle to defend it.

The tyrannids had evidently struck Konnandoil in a single mass, overwhelming the outlying districts on the side they’d attacked from in an unstoppable tsunami of cold malevolence. The PDF garrison had responded by setting up a defensive line on the fringes of the outer hab zone, giving the no doubt terrified civilians who lived there time to flee deeper into the town centre, where they could ultimately be eaten in a more salubrious environment.

There seemed to be little prospect of evacuating any survivors in the foreseeable future so far as I could tell, all our available air transport assets being fully engaged in ferrying more troops in. Nevertheless the line had held for a while, before the few surviving local PDF troopers had fallen back to join the second layer of defences, which had been hastily established by the first reinforcements to arrive, another PDF troop from a nearby plateau.

By the time we arrived the same grim dance had played itself out yet again, the surviving local units from around half a dozen scattered plateaux having consolidated at the third or fourth perimeter, which now encircled no more than two thirds of the besieged community.⁷⁰ Gathering from the sporadic local vox traffic that the vast majority of civilian survivors had been herded into the local temple, presumably in the hope that the Emperor would look after them as everyone else was too busy, I concentrated the

bulk of my attention on the area roughly equidistant between it and the defensive line in my search for a suitable landing site. (If the 'nids did break through they'd head for the temple with the single-minded determination of Jurgen spotting an all you can eat buffet, giving us a chance to flank them, I hoped.)

Spotting the plaza of the bureaucrats I directed the pilot to it, as I've already related, and left the flight deck to retrieve Jurgen and clamber aboard our Salamander. It had somewhat belatedly occurred to me that having been the last to board the shuttle our sturdy little scout vehicle would be poised at the top of the ramp, effectively blocking anyone else from getting off before we did, which as you'll appreciate was a far from ideal state of affairs from my point of view. Nevertheless, there was nothing else for it, and at least I'd done all I could to make sure we'd be put down as far from the 'nids as possible, so I resolved to make the best of the situation.

And make the best of it we did, Jurgen flinging us down the metal incline like a sump rat abandoning a waste pipe, while I clung on to the pintel mounted heavy bolter I always like to have installed on my personal transport as a bit of extra insurance, trying to give the impression of leading from the front and being ready for anything.⁷¹ Sulla's command Chimera followed us, and the troop transports fell into formation behind her, barrelling across the open space, which had been paved in an intricate pattern of multicoloured tiles before our shuttle's landing thrusters and the treads of our vehicles had made rather a mess of it.

'Fourth squad, with me.' Sulla's voice was crisp in my comm-bead, every bit as efficient as she usually was when deploying her troopers, and for a moment I wondered if I should have hitched a ride in her command vehicle after all. That way I could have taken advantage of the vox and auspex systems onboard it to keep track of the ebb and flow of the battle, and maximised my chances of staying out of harm's way. I'd also have been surrounded by armour plate; the Salamander was open topped, and uncomfortably exposed by comparison. On the other hand the sturdy little vehicle was faster and more agile than anything else in our inventory, and I'd outrun a tyrannid swarm in one before (albeit when there'd actually been somewhere to go), while hanging over the auspex in person would have meant being stuck in a large metal box with Sulla for the duration of the battle. On the whole, taking my chances with the 'nids seemed to be the

marginally less irritating of the alternatives. The equine lieutenant went on. 'First and second, sweep out to the left. Third and fifth, you've got the right.'

A chorus of acknowledgements echoed in my comm-bead, and I leaned over the lip of the driver's compartment, raising my voice over the racket of our engine and the screaming of the shuttle's fusion jets as it rose over our heads and banked sharply away in the direction we'd come from.

'Stick with the lieutenant,' I told Jurgen, and he nodded once, accelerating smoothly to slot us in alongside the command Chimera. If I was going to have to rely on Sulla to keep me out of the jaws of the tyranids, I wanted to be where I could keep an eye on her, and prevent her from doing anything too rash. A brief flurry of vox traffic in my ear told me that Faril was down too, and meeting a little resistance in his efforts to link up with the PDF elements we'd been sent to reinforce.

'Nothing we can't handle, though,' he informed us breezily, 'just a few gaunts. Our heavy bolters are chewing them up nicely.'

'Glad to hear it,' I told him. The data-slate I'd brought with me from Hoarfell bumped gently against my hip as Jurgen bounced us over the central island of a gyratory road junction, and an idea belatedly occurred to me: I didn't have to manage without access to the tactical displays just because I wasn't inside the command vehicle after all. I fished the portable cogitator out of my pocket, removed it from the anonymous Guard issue protective case, and muttered the litany of activation as I pressed what I hoped were the right keys. It had been some time since I'd needed to patch a slate into a local datanet myself, and I'd got used to having a regimental enginseer around to delegate that sort of thing to. Fortunately my memory proved to be accurate, and in a moment the icon I'd been hoping to see appeared on the little pict screen. 'Sulla, can your vox op⁷² download the tactical display to my slate?'

'No problem, commissar,' her familiar eager tone reassured me, and a moment later a detailed plan of the town appeared on the screen, overlaid with tiny moving icons showing the disposition of our forces and the dull, amorphous mass of the tyranid swarm. I noted with approval that Faril appeared to have joined up with what was left of the left flank of our defensive line, and that the 'nids' advance there appeared to have halted as a result, while the centre was holding on nicely. Indeed, our forces seemed to be gaining a little ground in that spot if anything, which was not only a

welcome surprise, but also quite astonishing for mere local militia. Recognising the icon for the main command unit, whoever that was, I directed Sulla to join it.

‘Good idea,’ she said, apparently under some sort of illusion that I gave a frak what she thought. ‘If we come in on their right we can broaden the salient. Otherwise they’re going to get cut off, if they keep advancing at that rate without consolidating.’

‘You’re right,’ I said, zooming in on the image on the tiny screen to get a clearer view of that section of the front line. With the larger, more detailed image of the portable hololith aboard the command vehicle to consult, Sulla had spotted what the reduced scale of the handheld display had made less obvious to me.

The unit gaining ground ahead of us, whoever they were, was advancing with a reckless disregard for their own safety, pushing deeper and deeper into the densely packed mass of tyranids facing them. Unless the flanking units followed, and started gaining a little ground too, the ’nids would be able to exploit the gap they’d opened up and surround them. More to the point, there was a more than even chance that part of the swarm would be able to sweep the other way too, gushing through the hole in our own lines that the gung-ho idiots had ripped open, wreaking Emperor alone knew what havoc in the streets behind us before the next batch of Guard troopers arrived to mop up the mess: assuming anyone could once our defences had been breached. ‘Follow up and reinforce, while I try to rein in those frakheads before they invite the ’nids round for tanna and florn cakes.’

‘You can rely on us, commissar,’ Sulla assured me, happy as ever to have something to shoot at, and began issuing orders to her troops. ‘You all know the drill. Advance behind the Chimeras, use whatever other cover you can, and watch each other’s backs. Concentrate your small-arms fire on the largest creatures you can see when you get the opportunity, but don’t let the little ones get too close while you’re doing it, especially the ’stealers. Heavy weapons concentrate on the big ones, and try to disrupt their formations.’

‘And don’t advance too far,’ I added. ‘If that reckless idiot out there gets too far ahead, leave him flapping in the breeze and pull back to hold the line. Our highest priority has to be protecting the civilians.’ Not to mention my own tender skin, but it would hardly be tactful to say so over the comm net, and I knew from experience that practically the only thing likely to keep Sulla on the leash once she started dealing out damage to the enemy

was an appeal to her overdeveloped sense of duty.

‘Understood,’ she said crisply, and went on issuing more detailed instructions to her squad commanders.

By now we were approaching the battlefield, the streets around us beginning to show clear signs of damage, while the unmistakable sounds of mortal combat wafted towards us through the moisture thick air, mingled with smudges of smoke and the rank smell of charred flesh. The Valhallans would find these humid conditions extremely uncomfortable, of that I had no doubt, but I knew them well enough to be sure that they’d fight just as effectively here as they would anywhere else, with the possible exception of a glacier field, where nothing or no one could challenge their superiority.

Jurgen slowed us a little, steering round a puddle of something viscid and greenish, which stank to the Golden Throne and seemed to have dissolved part of the roadway. As we skirted it I noticed a few pieces of metal in the middle of the mess, which looked suspiciously like the remnants of lasguns, hissing quietly as they sublimed into goo. More splashes of bio-acid had eaten through the façades of a couple of nearby buildings, and I breathed a silent word of thanks to the Emperor that whatever had vomited them up appeared to be long gone.

Leaving Sulla to continue her advance, and spotting a handful of PDF troopers in a rather more practically drab version of the local uniform than most of them seemed to favour,⁷³ I decided to speak to whoever was in charge and get an up-to-date assessment of the current situation. Tactical displays are all very well, but if you really want to know what’s going on at the sharp end, it often pays to ask the troopers dodging the lasbolts how things seem from their perspective. Most of the troopers looked up in a desultory fashion as Jurgen slewed us to a halt with his usual vigour, raising a small hailstorm of pulverised roadbed from beneath our tracks as he did so, regarding me through eyes hollow with exhaustion as I hopped down from the Salamander to greet them.

‘Commissar Cain,’ I said, injecting just enough of a parade ground snap into my voice to get the nearest man’s attention without antagonising him needlessly. He had a corporal’s chevrons pinned to the collar of his midnight-blue fatigues, which were the only signs of rank I could see anywhere. The dark grey flak armour on his torso bore the unmistakable gashes of genestealer talons. ‘Attached to the 597th Valhallan.’

After a moment, vague recognition stirred behind his fatigue-dulled eyes.

‘I’ve seen you in the picts,’ he said slowly. His posture straightened a little, and he glanced around at the motley collection of troopers surrounding him, all of whom bore minor wounds of one sort or another, mainly bites, claw or talon slashes, and in a couple of cases flash burns from what looked like the near detonation of bio-plasma bolts. ‘Straighten up and look like soldiers, you dung-shovelling rabble.’

Instead of saluting, as I’d expected, he made the sign of the aquila, and most of the others followed suit, shuffling into a rough approximation of attention as they did so. ‘It’s an honour, sir.’

‘At ease,’ I said, turning on the charm that normally served me so well. ‘If anyone’s earned the right to relax a little, it’s surely the heroes who’ve endured so much to protect this place.’

‘We can relax when the hell spawn have gone,’ the corporal replied, looking at me a trifle oddly I thought. Then again, given what they’d evidently been through in the last few hours, it was hardly surprising if his elastic had gone a little slack. ‘We’re just regrouping, getting ready to follow up the main advance.’

‘Your zeal does you credit,’ I said, nodding approvingly, and doing some rapid analysis in my head. If his unit had suffered the usual attrition rate there could only be a few score effectives left by now, if that, and exhausted as they evidently were they’d have trouble fending off a flock of irritable butterflies, never mind a swarm of tyrannids intent on ripping every living thing on the plateau into shreds. ‘But the Guard are here now. Let us take up the slack, while you recuperate a little.’ That way at least some of them might be in a fit state to fight again if my worst fears came to pass, and whoever was leading this suicidal charge into the heart of the enemy formation did overreach themselves and let the ’nids through our lines.

To my surprise, however, the corporal shook his head, a quietly determined cast settling across his features. ‘We can’t do that, sir, it wouldn’t be right. It’s our holy duty to follow where the sisters lead.’

‘Ah.’ The coin dropped at last, and I finally registered the rosaries, *fleur de lys*, and icons of the Emperor that most of the troopers seemed to be sporting somewhere about their person. Not all that unusual, of course, but now I came to think about it, in greater profusion and rather more prominently displayed than was perhaps the norm. ‘You’re from Gavarrone.’

‘That’s right.’ The corporal nodded, a gesture echoed by most of the group

around us. Reflecting that there would be no point in arguing with a bunch of religious fanatics, and that if they were that determined to throw their lives away they'd at least distract the tyranids while the Valhallans inflicted some real damage on the horde, I stood aside.

'Then by all means, do as your conscience dictates,' I said, making the sign of the aquila myself as I did so. (And, I may add, keeping a remarkably straight face in the process.) 'The Emperor protects.'

'And may He watch over you,' the whole bunch of them responded, for all the galaxy as if they were chanting the responses in some dull suburban chapel. Then they turned and shuffled away in the wake of our Chimeras.

I clambered aboard the Salamander, suffused with a new sense of urgency. The reason for the insane charge straight down the throats of the enemy was now completely clear to me. Eglantine's Emperor-bothering harridans wouldn't stop moving until they were cut to pieces, no doubt believing that every foot of ground they gained was a sign of personal favour from Him on Earth, and utterly heedless of the wider tactical implications of their actions. I wondered briefly why Zyvan would even have contemplated ordering them in and then dismissed the thought. No doubt he hadn't, the canoness having taken it upon herself to order a squad or two of her battle-sisters along to accompany the Gavarronian PDF detachments the lord general had requested. In any case, the reason they were there was entirely moot. The only thing that mattered now was calling them off, quickly, before their misguided fanaticism doomed us all.



TWENTY

At least the troublesome sisters were easy enough to find. I just had to look for the densest concentration of tyrannids on the plateau, and, sure enough, as Jurgen swung us around the corner of what had apparently once been a fashionable shopping parade, there they were, merrily slaughtering their way through a dense thicket of onrushing hormagaunts, the bounding horrors' scything claws making little impression on the women's gleaming power armour. They'd taken some casualties of course, two or three of their number lying sprawled in the gutters, plainly beyond even the Emperor's help, let alone any mortal medicae, but the psychotic sisterhood seemed as indifferent to their own losses as the 'nids were to theirs, and an impressive number of chitinous corpses lay scattered around the place too. Gaunts by the score, which came as no surprise, but several of the larger warrior forms as well, which probably accounted for their amazing success, at least so far. By luck or by judgement (almost certainly the former, although no doubt they'd claim it was the guidance of the Emperor), they seemed to have taken out all the creatures in the immediate vicinity relaying the influence of the hive mind, leaving them to face essentially mindless drones, which would continue to fall back slowly in the face of their fanatical advance until something capable of directing them intelligently came into range and brought them back under control again. Which it surely would do before long, as smoothly and automatically as blood clotting around a wound, the vast inhuman intelligence no doubt already aware of the gap that had appeared in its zone of control.

When that happened, of course, things would turn really nasty in a matter of seconds, as the entire horde became suffused with renewed purpose, and began acting as one again. Nevertheless, it seemed things weren't quite as

desperate as I'd feared. I still had a little time to act before the overconfident Emperor-botherers found themselves suddenly facing a focussed attack. A quick glance at the slate reassured me that Sulla was bolstering our flanks, so that if the worst came to the worst we should at least be able to hold the scuttling horde at bay until further reinforcements arrived, although that would be scant comfort to me if I'd been reduced to indigestion by that time, and I memorised the quickest routes back to our lines just to be on the safe side.

'We're holding position on the edges of the salient,' the lieutenant reported a moment later, the sound of her voice in my comm-bead unusually welcome. 'Do you want us to move up and support you?'

Of course I'd have liked nothing better, especially as I was distracted for a moment before replying by the bothersome necessity of turning the heavy bolter on a flock of gargoyles that had spotted us and evidently thought we'd be easy pickings, but that could go horribly wrong too easily, despite the comfort having a squad or two of heavily armed troopers around me would have brought. If I had to run for it in a hurry I wanted somewhere to run to, where the platoon was well dug in and could provide adequate covering fire, rather than being cut to pieces around me while the 'nids broke through our overstretched defensive line and left me with nowhere to go.

'Better to dig in and reinforce the line,' I said, although it was hard to tell which of the two of us was the most despondent at the sound of my words. 'You'll get your chance to hunt bugs soon enough.' I paused, struck by an afterthought. 'There are some PDF survivors wandering around our rear, planning to follow the holy terrors into the breach. Stop them advancing any further if you can, and try to get them to dig in like proper soldiers. They won't be much help from what I've seen, but there's no point in letting them throw their lives away needlessly, and at least they can still shoot from cover.' That was to turn out to be a huge mistake on my part, of course, but I had no way of knowing that at the time.

'Yes, sir,' Sulla assured me, and I returned my attention to the immediate problem. Jurgen and I had emerged into another piazza, in which a fountain still played, somewhat incongruously, the wide basin choked with genestealer corpses and the remains of a battle-sister, who, judging by the wide distribution of her mortal residue, had detonated her entire stock of frag grenades in the moment of being finally overrun. The main battle had

swept on since the poor girl's untidy demise, however, and seemed to be concentrated at the far end of the plaza, where three narrow streets entered the wide open space, one at each corner, with the third equidistant between them. I glanced around, with a shiver of apprehension. As I'd instantly surmised, the arrangement was repeated all around the square, which gave a grand total of eight potential entry points, although predictably the sisters were throwing themselves at the only three through which an enemy was visible, completely ignoring the possibility of being flanked.

'Which one's the command squad?' Jurgen asked, and I scanned the seething knots of power-armoured viragos in search of someone evidently in charge of this debacle. I'd had as little as I could contrive to do with the militant arm of the Ecclesiarchy over the years, and most of the contact I'd been unable to avoid had been with one or other of the Orders Majoris, so the specific iconography of the Order of the White Rose would be completely unfamiliar to me.

All the sisters were dressed in the same dazzling silver armour that Eglantine had worn, with black or dark blue surplices bearing the symbol of their order flapping about them as they blazed away with their bolters or incinerated gaunts with hissing flamers, so that was no help. The squad in the centre seemed a little smaller in number than the others, though, and the movements of its members a little better co-ordinated and more disciplined, which marked them out as veterans, and reasoning that the most experienced warrior on the battlefield would be in overall command I directed my aide to head in that direction with all due dispatch.

'Two squads of PDF have arrived,' Sulla told me, as Jurgen began threading the Salamander through the debris of the battle. Our treads crushed tyrannid corpses pretty much everywhere we turned, and I found myself grudgingly impressed by the evident fighting prowess of the battle-sisters, notwithstanding the fact that their single-minded zealotry still looked like coming within a hair of dooming us all. 'They're reluctant to accept our orders, though.'

'Then use your best judgement,' I said, not having any time to waste on this now. The battle was getting closer, and we were beginning to attract the attention of more of the 'nids. Sulla acknowledged me briefly, and cut the link, and to my immense relief I began to pick up a fresh source of signals almost immediately.⁷⁴

'This is Commissar Ciaphas Cain,' I transmitted at once, swinging the

bolter to take down a pack of hormagaunts that had leapt over the heads of the sisters on the left flank and were now bounding towards us with baleful intent. I noted the sudden renewal of their fighting spirit with trepidation. Clearly at least one synapse creature was coming within range and the tide of battle was about to turn, perhaps within a matter of seconds. 'Disengage and fall back!' The squad leader, who, now we'd come close enough to distinguish one psychotic psalm-singer from another, stood out from the others by virtue of the chainsword and bolt pistol in her hands, turned and looked in my direction. Like most of her sisters she disdained the use of a helmet, despite the manifest foolishness of such a course,⁷⁵ and her narrow face was clearly visible, framed by the rather unflattering hairstyle common to most women of her calling. Dark eyes glared at me from beneath a crudely cropped black fringe, which didn't quite manage to hide the *fleur de lys* tattoo emblazoned on her freckle-spattered forehead.

Thin lips compressed in disapproval. 'We're servants of His Blessed Majesty,' she snapped, 'and not subject to the authority of your office. Go and shoot a few malingering Guardsmen like you're supposed to, and leave us to our holy task.'

'You're about to be overrun,' I said. 'Getting yourselves slaughtered isn't going to help the Emperor very much, is it?'

'Our destinies lie in His hands alone,' she responded, turning to disembowel a gaunt, which had just discharged its fleshborer at one of her comrades from point-blank range. The unfortunate woman shrieked as the living ammunition chewed most of her face away in an instant and began burrowing down beneath her armour in search of a vital organ or two, which they seemed to find mercifully quickly, judging by the way what was left of her suddenly spasmed and collapsed. I'd have expected the others to react in some fashion, but the hideous demise of their comrade only seemed to make them even more determined to fight on to the death.

Well, frak them then, I thought, bringing the bolter to bear on a group of purestrain 'stealers emerging from one of the other alley mouths I'd noticed before. Time to be going. I gave it one more try.

'If you don't pull back now, you'll not only die for nothing, you'll let the swarm in through the hole you've left in our lines,' I said, fighting the feeling that I'd be better off talking to the 'nids. Then inspiration suddenly struck. 'And as soon as that happens,' I went on, 'they'll head straight for the temple and slaughter every civilian taking shelter in there, praying to the

Emperor for deliverance. If you really want to report to the Golden Throne after allowing that kind of desecration to happen when you know you could have prevented it, I suppose that's a matter between you and Him on Earth.' I turned to my aide. 'Get us out of here, Jurgen. We've done what we can.'

'Right you are, commissar,' he agreed, as phlegmatically as ever, and swung the agile little vehicle around on its tracks.

As I caught my first clear sight of what now lay behind us, my bowels spasmed. My worst fears were being realised. A veritable flood of chitinous horrors was pouring into the square from the side streets, and we were almost cut off from safety already. Leaving the Sister Superior to work out her own salvation, I crouched as low as I could, blazing away with the pintel-mounted weapon at anything that seemed to get too close, searching frantically for the larger creatures that would be imbuing the mass of scuttling obscenity with direction and purpose. I cut down one of the warrior forms as it aimed a deathspitter at us, but it fired as it fell, spattering the hull of our Salamander with foul smelling bio-acid as its payload of maggot-like creatures burst against the armour plate. A few stray droplets began eating away at my greatcoat, but fortunately I was able to shrug it off before it fully penetrated the weave, wishing I'd had the foresight to don my precious set of carapace armour beneath it.

'Jurgen, the flamer!' I ordered, and my aide complied, clearing our way with a gout of blazing promethium, which fortuitously caught another of the warrior forms in the backwash along with the gaunts it was directing. It went down, shrieking as it burned, and a moment later the Salamander lurched as the hideous creature finally expired beneath our treads. I ducked as another flight of gargoyles swooped low over our heads, flinching in anticipation of a deadly rain of fleshborer beetles, but it seemed they had another target in mind, the tyranid intelligence no doubt considering that it had enough flesh and chitin between us and safety to pick us off with little difficulty, and right then I found it hard to disagree. The gargoyles soared over one of the battle-sister squads, strafing them as they went, then beat their wings lazily as they rose to go around for another pass. Two of the women fell, and the others returned fire with their bolters, bringing down a handful of the swooping monstrosities. The Celestians I'd spoken to were at least attempting to break out now, but I had a horrible suspicion that they'd left it too late. That was certainly true of their comrades on the right flank, half of whom had got themselves entangled in the flesh-ripping growth of a

barbed strangler. One of them managed to trigger her flamer, burning her way free, but it was too late for her companions, strange thorned growths bursting out through their unprotected flesh. Why they never seem to bother to put the helmets on those power suits of theirs is completely beyond me.⁷⁶

‘Sulla,’ I voxed, trying to keep an edge of panic out of my voice, ‘we’re coming in hot. The ’nids have broken through.’

‘Acknowledged.’ Her voice sounded infuriatingly calm, although for all I know she was working as hard at giving that impression as I was. ‘We’ll cover you as soon as you’re in range.’

‘I’m delighted to hear it,’ I said, raising my voice a little over the racket of the hull-mounted heavy bolter, which Jurgen was using in conjunction with the flamer to clear a path for us. I swung the pintel-mounted weapon, taking full advantage of its all around arc of fire to keep the fleas off our backs as best I could, the main weapons on the sturdy little vehicle being fixed forward. (Not for the first time blessing my foresight in having the thing installed, I may add.) ‘Any idea when that will be?’

‘Any time now,’ Sulla assured me, which, vague as it was, sounded pretty good. ‘Fourth squad’s moving up to support your retreat.’ She paused. ‘And the local mob insisted on going with them, for whatever that’s worth.’

Not a lot, I thought, if they were all in the same state as the ones we’d met before, but every little helped, and even if they just ended up as ’nid bait, that would at least distract the creatures for a moment or two while we made a break for it.

‘Commissar,’ Jurgen said, ‘really big one, two o’clock.’ I turned in the direction he’d indicated, my heart hammering. True enough, just out of the line of fire of our main weapons, the unmistakable bulk of a hive tyrant loomed, pointing a venom cannon in our direction. I ducked reflexively beneath the armour plate surrounding me an instant before the deadly rain of poison shards pattered against it, bobbing up almost at once to grab the bolter before the creature could fire again. I managed to stitch a burst across its chest, and it staggered, but stayed on its feet, shrieking like a damned heretic.

‘Hold on, commissar!’ a new voice chimed in. ‘We’re on the way!’ With a sudden flare of relief I recognised it as Sergeant Grifen, whose courage and competence I had good reason to trust, having passed through a necron tomb with her on Simia Orichalcae. True she’d lost most of her squad in the process, but that was hardly her fault, and she’d got me out in one piece,

which was what mattered to me.

‘Glad you could join us,’ I said, conscious of having an image to maintain, and tried to get a line on the tyrant again. If I could only take it down, I thought, that might just disrupt the swarm long enough for us to make it to safety. The hope was a forlorn one, of course, there would be plenty of other synapse creatures within range by now, but when it’s the only one you’ve got, I’ve always found, even a forlorn hope can look pretty good.

The hulking monstrosity’s shrieking intensified, and, forewarned, I ducked below the armour plate again just as it vomited a ball of bio-plasma at me and charged forwards, striking out with its rending claws. The thick slab of metal protecting me ripped like tissue paper, our hurtling Salamander slowed, and I rolled frantically, trying to evade the reaching talons. There was no time to reach the heavy weapon, even if I could have got round the massive bulk of the monster rearing over me. Instead I drew my chainsword, striking out with it purely by reflex, and was rewarded with a gout of foul smelling ichor as the blade bit deep. The creature roared with rage and made to strike at me again, and I parried instinctively, slashing across its thorax, deepening the wounds made by the bolter.

‘I’ve got it,’ Jurgen said, imperturbable as ever, turning in his seat as he spoke, and I just had time to glimpse the melta in his hands before the actinic flash of its activation and the smell of charred meat enveloped my senses. The thing fell back, and our battered but unbowed Salamander leapt forward, leaving the wounded colossus staggering in our wake.

‘Well done,’ I complimented my aide, breathing a little heavily I must admit, and regaining my feet a trifle unsteadily even considering the fact that his driving was understandably more erratic than usual. He smiled, displaying teeth that would have made an ork recoil, and returned his attention to the controls. To my chagrin, though not I must admit to my complete surprise, the bolter was beyond use, fused and melted by the plasma burst, so I drew my laspistol and started plinking away at whatever targets presented themselves, more in hope than expectation.

‘Heads up, commissar,’ Grifen voxed, and to my immense relief fourth squad’s Chimera appeared in the gap between a restaurant and a clothing shop, the window dummies of which continued to watch the battle with the air of elegant disdain in which they’d been posed, despite a couple of stray rounds from our remaining bolter taking the head off one, which appeared to be dressed in little more than a few square centimetres of gauze and lace.

Jurgen triggered the flamer again, burning a path through what seemed like a solid mass of gaunts, and we both crouched as low as we could while fleshborers rattled off our armour plate like deadly hail.

Crushing a couple of the ghastly things that had fallen inside the crew compartment next to me under my boot heel, I ventured a cautious look over the rim, just in time to see the Chimera's heavy weapons open up, shredding the wounded tyrant, which had continued to charge doggedly in our wake despite the lead we were opening up.

'Good shooting,' I encouraged the unseen gunners, just as the spark and crackle of lasgun fire began to erupt from inside several of the buildings on that side of the square. I caught a glimpse of a couple of our troopers behind a first floor window, evidently the residence of whoever owned the restaurant, aiming and firing methodically as they sought out the synapse creatures they could see from their elevated position. A warrior 'nid a few score metres away from us recoiled as their lasbolts hit home almost simultaneously. 'Thanks, Vorhees.'

'You're welcome, commissar,' the male of the pair assured me, the barrel of his weapon already tracking another target. 'Janny, eleven o'clock.'

'I see it,' Trooper Drere assured us both, managing to get her shot off an instant ahead of him this time, the faint hiss of her augmetic lungs audible in my comm-bead. 'Frak, it's fast!'

I turned, seeing another warrior sprinting towards us, an entourage of gaunts at its heels. No more tyrants around, thank the Emperor, and I began to believe we might actually make it. The surviving battle-sisters had managed to cluster together, my old friend with the unbecoming haircut still keeping them in good order, although they seemed to have been whittled down to almost half their original number, and were forging their way back towards safety with relentless determination. Fair enough, the surviving synapse creatures still seemed to think they were the major threat, and were keeping the bulk of the swarm on the offensive against them, which was fine by me. If anything, I felt, it served the Emperor-bothering imbeciles right for dragging me into this mess in the first place.

More lasguns opened up, less disciplined and purposeful than the incoming fire from the Valhallans, but welcome nonetheless, and I caught a glimpse of the blue and grey uniformed Gavarronians taking what cover they could, or flattening themselves against the walls of the side streets. Random as it seemed, the fire they were putting out was at least felling a

few of the gaunts, and even the occasional 'stealer. More muzzle flashes betrayed the presence of at least half of fourth squad behind the protection afforded by their Chimera, their bare arms slick with sweat⁷⁷ as they aimed and fired at the surviving warriors.

'Keep going!' I encouraged Jurgen, and he triggered the flamer again, incinerating another brood of purestrains that was forging towards us with murder in what passed for their minds. Even if we could disrupt the hive mind again, the 'stealers would still remain a potent threat if they were allowed to survive, still functioning with a unity of purpose largely independent of the main overmind. I downed another with a lucky pistol shot to the head, and the survivors scuttled away, apparently convinced we weren't worth the effort. Or, more likely, just willing to let more of their mindless brethren wear us down before moving in for the kill. 'We're almost there!'

A couple of the PDF had heavy weapons with them, I saw now, a two-man team manhandling their rocket launcher into position for firing. I ducked reflexively as their missile left the tube, hurtling past us uncomfortably close, to detonate its payload of frag in the middle of a dense pocket of gaunts closing in on the sisters.

'That was a bit reckless,' Jurgen commented evenly, relying entirely on the flamer to get us through the press of chitinous abominations, as any bolter rounds we popped off would be as dangerous to our allies as to the enemy.

I nodded. 'Tell that idiot to watch where he's pointing his drainpipe,' I voxed, but before Grifen could respond the rocketeers fired again. This time the warhead dropped, detonating among the gaunts still peppering us ineffectually with fleshborers, shredding the majority of them most satisfactorily with its hail of shrapnel. Rather less satisfactory was the metallic clanging as several pieces of the warhead ricocheted from our severely battered armour plate, to be followed almost at once by an alarming rending noise.

The Salamander lurched abruptly to the left, banging my head painfully against the bulkhead separating the crew and passenger compartments, and then, to my horror, Jurgen cut the engine. 'One of the tracks is jammed,' he reported stoically, as though this was a misfortune on a par with the laundry shrinking a pair of my underpants. He hefted the melta. 'We'll have to make a run for it.'

'Great,' I said, shooting the face off a hormagaunt that had bounded up to

us and attempted to remove my head. Our chances of getting out of here on foot were non-existent. Even the sainted sisterhood was having a hard time of it, and they were in power armour, for the Emperor's sake. I stood up to parry another scything claw with my gently humming chainsword, blessing my duellist's reflexes as I did so. That bang on the head must have been worse than I thought. I felt weak and giddy, and if it hadn't been for the urgency of the situation making such a luxury too time-consuming, I'd probably have jettisoned my lunch. Blinking back the brown haze swirling in the corners of my vision I hacked and blocked like an automaton, no doubt displaying a complete lack of finesse that would have outraged old Miyamoto de Bergerac,⁷⁸ but which at least kept my head on my shoulders.

As the crowd of gaunts gave way, encouraged rather more by Jurgen's adroit use of his melta than my feeble efforts I'm forced to concede, I suddenly found myself facing something a whole lot worse. Another hive tyrant, apparently bred purely for close combat, reared up behind them, slashing down with its twin sets of scything claws. I tried to block the rain of blows, but stumbled, my legs giving way without warning as the dark cloud over my eyes rushed in, and I found myself pitching over the side of the Salamander to land on the cobbles at its feet.

The unexpected movement may, of course, have saved my life, the vile creature's flurry of strokes doing no more than inflict another massive dent on our sturdy little conveyance, but as I sprawled there I truly thought my last moment had come. Jurgen couldn't fire his melta while I was that close to it – he'd vaporise me as well – and there wasn't a heretic's hope in hell that he'd be able to reach his lasgun in time. Even if he did, he'd just annoy it. I struck out at its leg with my chainsword, hoping to cripple the thing just long enough to roll away, although if I did I'd only get ripped apart by something else, probably. The phantom cloud blanketed my vision, and a dull roaring sound filled my ears. I knew I was going to lose consciousness at any moment, and as soon as I did, that would be the end of me. At least I wouldn't be awake to feel it.

Frak that, I thought, the fierce survival instinct that has served me so well through so many desperate situations kicking in with a vengeance. If I am going to die, I'm going to take this walking obscenity with me. I rolled to my feet and staggered after it as it hopped back from my feeble strike, keeping inside the reach of its claws, and searching desperately for any sign of vulnerability. Emperor help me, if it had one I couldn't see it.

‘Commissar, get down!’ Grifen’s voice barked in my ear, and I complied without thinking, my knees giving way again and pitching me onto the ground. The roaring noise was louder now, but only when it was joined by the unmistakable chatter of a heavy bolter did I realise that I’d been hearing more than the blood in my ears. Fourth squad’s Chimera was charging to our rescue, both its heavy weapons chattering angrily as it came, and the looming monstrosity that had so nearly taken my life came apart in the middle like an overused practice dummy on the bayonet range. Lumps of offal pattered around me like obscene hailstones as the hideous creature slumped ponderously to the ground.

‘Come on, sir.’ A short, redheaded woman appeared through the haze obstructing my vision, hefting her lasgun one-handed as she fired it insouciantly at a nearby hormagaunt. She reached her other hand down to me, and I took it gratefully, allowing her to haul me to my feet, where I stood, staring around in vague incomprehension. ‘There you go, commissar, up we get.’

‘Thank you, Magot,’ I said, the fog growing thicker than ever. I swayed again, buoyed up by a sudden, and surprisingly welcome, burst of Jurgen’s distinctive aroma. My aide appeared through the brown miasma, clutching my pistol and chainsword as well as his own weapons, an unaccustomed expression of concern on his grimy features.

‘I’ve got your kit, sir. I’m afraid the coat’s had it, though.’

‘Get moving! Chat later.’ Grifen took hold of one of my arms, Magot the other, and hustled me up the Chimera’s boarding ramp, while its turret rotated, scything down most of the ’nids in the immediate vicinity.

‘Much obliged,’ I said, as the hatch clanged shut behind us, and our driver gunned the engine, hurling us back towards the relative safety of our lines. There was something I ought to say, I thought, or do, something important, but it wouldn’t come to me what it was. Then the fog swirled in at last, and I lost interest in everything.



Editorial Note:

Quite understandably under the circumstances, Cain picks up his account of events after a gap of almost three days. Such lacunae are far from uncommon in his memoirs, of course, and I habitually fill them in from other sources whenever appropriate material is to hand. Although it must be said that in very few instances are such interpolations quite as essential as they are here. Once again I feel I should apologise for including more of Jenit Sulla's attempts to batter the Gothic language into submission, but as always her position on the fringes of Cain's activities has left us with a potentially revealing insight into the wider picture, which he so seldom considers himself.

From Like a Phoenix on the Wing: The Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101 M42

The news that our gallant commissar had fallen was greeted with a mixture of incredulity and horror. We had all lost valued friends and comrades before, of course, for such is the lot of the common soldier, and all of us were equally willing to lay down our own lives in the service of the Emperor, but our hearts froze within us at the first intimation of these dolorous tidings.

My vox-operator's voice trembled noticeably as he informed me of the transmission he'd just received, and I must own to suppressing a faint cry of distress myself. Commissar Cain had forged and moulded the 597th, his inspirational leadership bringing us victory time and time again, even against the most hopeless odds, but it wasn't just because of this that he

embodied everything that was good about our regiment. During those tense few moments I found myself recalling innumerable instances of his unfailing courage, his constant concern for even the humblest trooper, and the many conversations we'd had in which his innate good humour, and evident regard for my qualities of leadership, had done so much to bolster my confidence in the dark times when the spectre of self-doubt had threatened to impair my effectiveness as a commander.

It was with no little sense of relief, then, that we received the joyful intelligence from fourth squad that their medic had examined him and pronounced him in no danger. Surely it would take more than a small force of tyranids to put paid to so redoubtable a warrior? The noble commissar, it seemed, had sustained a minor head wound, the effects of which had been exacerbated by the noxious fumes from a deathspitter round that had burst close to where he had fought so heroically against the tide of xenos-spawned corruption.

The Chimera conveying his unconscious form to safety rendezvoused with us before long, and I lost no time in ensuring that he was conveyed back to Hoarfell with the first transport shuttle to return with reinforcements, less than an hour later. By that time we had all too many wounded of our own to accompany him, but those of us who remained uninjured, or lightly enough so to continue discharging our duty to His Divine Majesty, persisted in the defence of Aceralbaterra, eventually prevailing by the grace of the Emperor.

It need hardly be said that Commissar Cain must take the greater part of the credit for this notable victory, for it was he alone who was responsible for dispatching no fewer than two of the hive tyrants directing the throng of scuttling foulness that beset us on all sides. Deprived of the guidance of these creatures the swarm began to lose cohesion, the remaining lesser creatures being too few in number to co-ordinate them effectively, and what had up until that point seemed an unstoppable advance began to falter.

As for the PDF lackwits whose ill-timed intervention had cost the commissar so dear, their fate remains shrouded in mystery. Loyal above all else to the righteous warriors of the Adepta Sororitas, to whose aid they had so disastrously gone, they remained to cover the holy sisters' retreat as best they could. Whether any survived, I couldn't truthfully say, preoccupied as I was by ensuring the most effective deployment of my own troopers, and by my understandable concern for the welfare of Commissar Cain.

What that may have been I have no idea, but suspect it was to give thanks

for their deliverance. For which, impious as the assertion may seem, I consider they had our noble commissar to thank at least as much as they did the Emperor Himself.

From *Periremunda Today: The News That Matters to Your Planet*, 287 933 M41

PERIREMUNDA IS SAVED!
TYRANIDS FLEE AS RELIEF FLEET ARRIVES!

The stoic resistance of our beleaguered citizens was rewarded late last night with the long awaited news that the task force dispatched from Coronus Prime has just emerged from the warp on the fringes of our system, and that a mighty flotilla of warships now protects our beloved home world from the looming terror of the approaching hive fleet. Not only that, the war on the ground has taken a positive turn too, with the arrival of two fresh battalions of Imperial Guard veterans, eager to mop up the remaining tyranid interlopers that continue to befoul the sacred soil of our Emperor blessed globe. With such a mighty force at their disposal, it can surely only be a matter of time before Periremunda is cleansed forever of the taint of xenos contamination.

In a full and frank interview, Governor Pismire commented, ‘Golly, that is good news. Are you sure about this? Who told you?’

Communiqué 47783/320/34598543, dated 292 933 M41

FROM: Admiral Bowe, commanding officer of Naval task force Divine Intervention.

TO: Lord General Zyvan, commanding officer Imperial ground forces, Periremunda system.

I’m pleased to report that deployment of our Naval assets has gone according to plan, and that eight separate flotillas of both Capital- and Escort-class vessels are standing ready to intercept the approaching hive fleet the moment it emerges from the warp. Our transport vessels are inbound, and should begin offloading your men within the hour. I’m sure you’ll know what to do with them.

Our astropaths can’t be entirely sure, with the shadow still blanking

everything, but our best estimate is that the bulk of the tyranid forces will arrive in no more than a day or two, so you'd better get them deployed fast.

Hope we can get together for a drink and a regicide game once the dust settles.

Regards,
Benjamin

From *Like a Phoenix on the Wing: The Early Campaigns and Glorious Victories of the Valhallan 597th* by General Jenit Sulla (retired), 101 M42

The opening salvos in the final battle for Periremunda were to be fired before long, and as that storm broke around us, I found myself considering how frustrating Commissar Cain must have found it to be confined to the medicae facility while the regiment went into action against so vile and inhuman a foe.

The battle began, of course, in deep space, the living ships of the hive fleet vomiting forth from the warp as though even that abominable realm was unable to stomach their foulness, to be met head on by the cream of the Imperial Navy. The struggle that ensued in the never-ending night among the stars must have been titanic indeed. From our position on the ground we were able to discern quite clearly innumerable flashes in the heavens, as living behemoths of unnaturally sculpted flesh met metal hulls sanctified by the Adeptus Mechanicus in the name of the Emperor, the cleansing fire of their mighty weapons, and the indomitable courage of their crews.⁷⁹

Though the fighting spirit of both crews and vessels alike remained undiminished, the sheer number of tyranid organisms facing them eventually began to tell, in a manner strikingly similar to those instances when their ground dwelling monstrosities face the unyielding resistance of the Imperial Guard. Admiral Bowe quite properly concentrated much of the fire from his battleships against the larger behemoths, hoping thereby to diminish the effectiveness of the fleet as a whole, leaving the smaller tyranid creatures to his cruisers and escorts. Successful as they undoubtedly were in this task, despite the number of vessels crippled or destroyed by the vengeful monstrosities they faced, a goodly number of these insidious organisms were able to slip through the cordon, and, as we'd feared, begin to rain mycetic spores onto the planet below.

By great good fortune the vast majority of these seeds of destruction fell in the wasteland between plateaux, leaving relatively few to drop on the

inhabited areas, many of which had been garrisoned by Imperial Guard troopers scarcely less able than those I was privileged to serve with. Suffice it to say that, whatever hopes of an easy victory the malign, inhuman intellect of the hive mind may have entertained, it was in for a rude awakening. Plateau after plateau was able to repulse the invaders, while those centres of population unfortunate enough still to be reliant on the Planetary Defence Forces for succour were evacuated as rapidly as possible.

On Hoarfell, I'm pleased to say, Colonel Kasteen's far-sighted preparations proved more than adequate, and only one incursion actually succeeded in posing a serious threat to our position in Darien.

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TWENTY-ONE

‘It could simply have been an accident,’ Kasteen said, a faint edge of doubt in her voice. ‘You said yourself they were totally exhausted, and the PDF aren’t exactly the best soldiers in the galaxy to begin with.’

Broklaw nodded, and handed me a bowl of tanna, which I took, grateful for the augmetic fingers that let me hold it steady enough to drink without spilling. That morning I’d finally had enough of being prodded and mauled by our medicae, despite the obvious attractions of lounging around in bed while the regiment took on the latest tyranid incursions without me, and hauled myself upright, trying to ignore the waves of nausea that continued to overtake me every time I turned my head too suddenly. The notion that the ’nids might be moving in on our garrison while I lay there oblivious, suffering from nothing worse than what felt like a severe hangover, nagged at my innate sense of paranoia, to the point where nothing would settle my apprehension short of a trip to our command centre to check out the tactical situation for myself.

‘I’d advise against it,’ the surgeon had told me, holding up an indeterminate number of blurry fingers in front of my eyes. ‘Concussion’s a tricky thing.’ He nodded at the pair of augmetic digits on my right hand. ‘Frak up your brain, and I won’t be able to replace it as easily as those.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind,’ I told him shortly, and smiled to ease the sting of my unthinking retort. ‘At least for as long as I’ve got one.’

‘Well, if you’re determined,’ the fellow said, shrugging. I’d been expecting more of an argument, to be honest; only later did it dawn on me that, thanks to my undeserved reputation, he must have taken it for granted that I’d be itching to get back to the front line as quickly as possible and would be in no mood to take no for an answer. Either that, or the prospect of finally

being able to rid his hospital of the health hazard posed by Jurgen, who had taken it upon himself to camp in the corridor outside my room for the entire duration of my stay, was too good to pass up. By the time my aide had appeared, a second or two after my nose had first registered his presence, bearing a clean uniform and my battered old weapons, I'd swung my legs off the bed and was beginning to feel more than satisfied with my decision.

It was only after we'd left, of course, that I began to doubt the wisdom of it, the first blast of a breeze, quite mild by Hoarfell's standards, making me stagger as the outer doors swung closed behind us. Jurgen held out a supporting arm, which, after a moment's understandable hesitation, I took, reasoning that I was at least upwind of him, and that it would do the morale of the regiment, not to mention my status as a Hero of the Imperium, no good at all if I keeled over flat on my arse in front of a building full of sniggering troopers.

'Not far now, sir,' Jurgen assured me, leading the way to a comfortably appointed staff car that he'd managed to appropriate from somewhere, apparently having decided, quite correctly, that I was in no condition (or mood, come to that) to be bouncing around in the back of another Salamander at the moment. I settled into the soft upholstery with an involuntary sigh of relief, reminded of our eventful journey in Keesh's limousine so shortly after our arrival, although of course this particular vehicle was nowhere near as luxurious as the arbitrator's personal transport had been.

As Jurgen pulled away from the kerb I found myself recalling that earlier eventful trip, the first occasion after our arrival on which someone had tried to kill me without warning, in some detail. That time, at least, my assailants' motives had been clear enough. Keesh was the intended target, and I'd simply been the victim of an unfortunate case of mistaken identity.

The other attempts on my life had been very different, though, intended to kill me specifically without a shadow of a doubt, but that had been pretty much the only thing they'd had in common. Try as I might, I still couldn't see any reason why a renegade tech-priest would throw in his lot with a coven of Chaos cultists. Nor, for that matter, why either would go to so much trouble to eliminate me, who hardly posed much of a threat to either of them. At least no one had tried again.

My palms began to tingle, in that old familiar fashion I'd learned to trust over the years. The PDF troopers with the rocket launcher could simply

have been overexcited or incompetent, of course, but they'd come within a hair of killing me just the same, and in a fashion no one could possibly consider deliberate; not unless they had a mind as nasty and devious as mine, anyway.

I voiced my suspicions as soon as I was alone with Kasteen and Broklaw, the two people in the regiment who were as close to friends as it was possible to be, given our respective positions, and the two whose judgement I was most inclined to trust.

Both officers listened in silence as I spoke, nodding as I finished speaking and sat back in my chair with an expectant air.

'If you are right,' the major said, resuming his seat and picking up his own tanna bowl, 'you're going to have Horus's own time proving it. If they really wanted to kill you out there, why not just lob a krak round at you and make sure of the job?'

Kasteen nodded her agreement. 'That would have taken out a Salamander pretty easily,' she pointed out. 'Frag warheads are next to useless against an armoured vehicle. It was just a fluke your tracks getting jammed like that.'

'Normally I'd agree,' I said, sipping the fragrant liquid gratefully, 'but I was in an open passenger compartment, standing up at the pintel mount. If they'd hit a little closer, I'd have been taken out by the shrapnel as readily as the 'nids.'

'And don't forget most of fourth squad had a clear view of what was going on,' Broklaw added helpfully, having apparently been struck by a fresh idea. 'If it really was another assassination attempt, popping off a krak round against a dispersed target would have seemed distinctly odd to most of them.'

'Whereas a frag rocket was exactly what anyone watching would have been expecting them to use. If they had shredded me, no one would have suspected a thing.' I shrugged ruefully. 'Let's face it, I'd hardly have been the first commissar to be killed by a friendly fire accident.'

'That's true,' the colonel conceded, with a meaningful glance at Broklaw. It wouldn't be entirely true to say that as many of my colleagues fall at the hands of the men they're serving with as to the guns of the enemy, but far more do than is generally admitted, which, given the nature of our job, is hardly surprising. That, incidentally, is why I try to get the young whelps I'm responsible for these days to realise that they'll do far better by relying on tact and commonsense than the letter of the regulations. (Or at least last

a bit longer.) ‘But why would they want to? It’s not as if you’d executed any of their friends, is it?’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. I sighed, already regretting the impulse to get out of bed. My head was throbbing gently again, as though I’d drunk about three glasses of amasec more than was sensible, but without the consolation of having had the convivial time that ought to have left me feeling that way. ‘But why would a Chaos cult and a renegade tech-priest I’d never heard of be gunning for me either?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ Kasteen said cautiously. ‘I imagine that’s more the sort of question your other contacts could answer.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ I said, knowing better than to expect any information from Amberley that she didn’t want to part with. I rubbed my throbbing temples. ‘I don’t know. Maybe I’m overreacting.’

‘Hard not to, when some frakwit nearly blows your head off and feeds you to the ’nids,’ Broklaw said tactfully. He shrugged. ‘If it was one of ours, of course, you could pull them in and question them about it.’

‘I could,’ I said, an idea beginning to form. Maybe it was the headache, but it seemed a pretty good one to me at the time. ‘And I still might. The commissariat gives me wide powers of investigation where the security of the Imperial forces is potentially compromised. Can we really be certain that the Gavarronian PDF hasn’t been infiltrated by ’stealers?’

‘That canoness seemed pretty positive,’ Kasteen reminded me.

‘Exactly.’ I nodded, then instantly regretted it. ‘That means Keesh hasn’t run the usual checks on them. If those trolls were hybrids they couldn’t attack the sisters without blowing their cover, but the chance to take out an Imperial commissar would have been too good to pass up.’

‘Especially as the pict’s have been building you up as the single-handed saviour of the planet,’ Broklaw added. He nodded judiciously. ‘It does make a twisted kind of sense.’

‘I’ll take that as a compliment,’ I said. I wobbled to my feet, leaning on Kasteen’s desk for support as I did so, pretending I hadn’t seen the flicker of concern that had passed between my companions. I smiled at Kasteen. ‘If you don’t mind, I’d like a vox-link to the lord general’s office whenever it’s convenient.’ Several of our platoons were currently engaged in running battles with ’nid swarms that had dropped from the skies while I’d been enjoying my enforced rest, and our comms net was pretty stretched as a result. Eager as I was to follow this up, it would have to wait until they’d

been beaten back, at least for now.

‘No problem.’ The colonel looked a little puzzled. ‘May I ask why?’

I smiled grimly. ‘If I’m right, the Gavarronians should be pulled back from all front line duties at once, pending a full investigation.’

‘I see.’ Broklaw looked at me sardonically. ‘Which you’ll conduct, of course.’

‘Who better?’ I asked rhetorically.

After a few more minutes of chatting quietly and sipping tanna in Kasteen’s office I felt a little more like my usual self, and wandered down to the main command centre to see how the war was getting on. At the time, of course, I had no intention of actually participating in any more of the fighting, which, when you’ve experienced as much of it as I have, has considerably more appeal as a spectator sport. From long habit I’d slipped the comm-bead into my ear as I’d got dressed, as automatically as I’d buckled my weapon belt, and had been keeping half an ear on the signal traffic even while I’d been speaking to Kasteen and Broklaw, so I had a rough idea of the prevailing tactical situation already. But looking at it in the hololith display made everything much clearer, just as I’d expected.

While I’d been taking my enforced nap, it seemed, the ’nids had been dropping spores all over Hoarfell (and just about everywhere else too, of course, but that wasn’t my problem), and, naturally, obeying the genetically encoded imperatives of their kind, had swarmed towards Darien as rapidly as they could, drawn by the lure of the concentrated biomass the city represented. Kasteen had foreseen this, of course, and deployed our troops where they could harass them as they advanced, breaking up the smaller swarms before they could coalesce, and generally giving the scuttling horrors as hard a time as our people could contrive. And pretty successfully, too, if the display in the hololith could be believed. Most of the lesser broods had been eliminated piecemeal before they had a chance to join up with their siblings, and relatively few had made it through to reinforce the ones that had fallen on the city itself.

‘We’ve kept them out of the streets, for the most part,’ Kasteen said, indicating our deployment around the outskirts of Darien. ‘The few that have made it into the urban areas are heading straight for the star port, trying to join up with the group there.’ The ghost of a grin flitted across her face. ‘That means we can ambush and eliminate most of those pretty

easily.'

'So your only real problem's here, at the aerodrome,' I said, noting with some relief that the fears that had driven me from my sickbed were apparently unfounded. So far, at least, none of the broods we'd detected seemed intent on attacking us in our garrison.

Broklaw nodded. 'You don't know the half of it. We've got nearly a thousand refugees trapped in the terminal building,' he said. 'Evacuated from lower down.'

'Most of them have been stuck there for days,' Kasteen added, 'waiting for genetic screening to weed out any hybrids among them, but the justicars have been a bit too busy to deal with that.'

'I can imagine,' I said dryly. The wide open spaces of the landing field had been tailor-made for an invasion force, of course, and our air defence assets could only bring down so many of the falling spores. If it hadn't been for the Navy keeping the bulk of the hive fleet otherwise occupied, we'd have had our hands a lot fuller than they actually were by now. Once again, though, Kasteen had anticipated this very contingency, applying the lessons so painfully learned on the battlefields of Corania, and deployed our forces to keep them bottled up.

'To be honest,' Kasteen said, 'the refugees are getting to be almost as much trouble as the 'nids. They can hear the fighting from where they are, and they're pretty much on edge. The PDF is trying to keep the lid on them, but it'll only take one idiot to panic and we'll have a riot to deal with on top of the bugs.'

'Not good,' I said, seeing the problem at once. The last thing the beleaguered defenders needed was a horde of panic-stricken civilians running around blocking our fire lanes, and driving the tyrannids into a killing frenzy. As soon as the creatures realised they were within spitting distance of a good square meal they'd surge forward, putting even more strain on our defensive positions. 'Are you going to reinforce the line here, just in case?'

Broklaw nodded again. 'We're moving another platoon up as soon as their Chimeras are refuelled and their ammo replenished.' A thought seemed to strike him, and with a sudden quiver of apprehension I knew even before he spoke what he was about to suggest. 'You could go in with them if you like.'

'That ought to calm the civilians down,' Kasteen agreed. 'Half of them

seem to think you're the greatest warrior since Macharius.'

I looked at them both, cursing the impulse that had dragged me out of a nice cosy sickbed for no good reason, and which looked like dropping me straight into harm's way again. I could always plead fatigue and weakness, of course, but how much harm would that do to the image I'd acquired of indomitable courage, however unmerited it actually was, and to the loyalty it seemed to inspire among the regiment?

That's the trouble with reputations, once you've got one you need to maintain it. Kasteen and Broklaw were undoubtedly under the same delusion as the chirurgon had been, that I'd left the sickbay because I was chafing to get back into action despite my wounds, and if I dispelled it I was going to undermine their confidence in me. Once that happened, my unquestioned leadership would start to crumble too. So I forced an easy smile to my face, as though I thought the idea a good one.

'Well,' I said, feigning just the right amount of reluctance to make them think I was actually eager to get back out there, 'holding the hands of a bunch of nervous civilians wasn't quite what I had in mind when I got up this morning.' That was true enough. I wobbled on my feet a little, just enough to remind them that I was in a far worse state than I was pretending, and was rewarded with another covert exchange of concerned looks. 'But I could do with a breath of fresh air, and I suppose I'd only be getting in the way on the front lines.' For a moment I wondered if I'd overplayed my hand, and had just bought myself a ticket into the war zone, but Kasteen and Broklaw were both nodding in agreement.

'With all due respect, Ciaphas,' Kasteen said, making it clear that she was talking as a friend rather than a comrade in arms, 'you look like something an ork spat out. I really wouldn't recommend you visit the combat zone today.'

'Well,' I said, permitting a little of the reluctance I felt to show through, and allowing them to think it was because I'd just been argued out of going off to take another pop at the 'nids, 'I suppose you're right, and I might be able to do a little good with the civvies.'

All in all, I thought, it could have been a great deal worse. I'd be getting a lot closer to the action than I'd have liked, but if the tactical display could be trusted there didn't seem much prospect of running into any actual tyranids, and I didn't suppose the refugees would be that much of a problem. Perhaps fortunately, I was blissfully unaware at the time of just

how catastrophically wrong I would turn out to be on both counts.

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TWENTY-TWO

Getting to the star port terminal turned out to be simple enough, as Faril's platoon was just leaving the staging area to relieve Sulla's, who'd apparently been potting away at the chitinous horrors for the last day or so with a gratifying amount of success.⁸⁰ Jorgen and I managed to hitch a lift in the command Chimera, and although conditions there weren't exactly calculated to make me feel better, the usual noise and jolting hardly improved by my aide's close proximity in a confined space, I was glad enough of it. No doubt he could have found us another Salamander without too much trouble if I'd requested one, but after our experiences on Aceralbaterra I felt rather more comfortable entirely surrounded by armour plate, and I was able to make use of the vox and auspex gear surrounding me to get a far clearer picture of the way the battle was going than I would otherwise have had.

To my relief, it seemed as though the situation had hardly changed since my last look at the hololith in the command centre. Our forces still held the perimeter of the aerodrome and were advancing steadily, slowly strangling the 'nid swarm in an ever-tightening noose, driving them gradually closer to the sheer drop over which I had so nearly plunged myself a few short weeks before. Not that I expected many to actually fall to their deaths, of course – they'd shown on all too many other occasions that they could clamber up the sheer sides of the plateaux with astonishing dexterity, and I had no reason to believe that they wouldn't prove equally adept at descending if they had to. If anything the gap between the front line and the terminal building had increased, and I began to feel that this make-work errand might turn out to be the best course of action after all, keeping me well out of the way of any actual fighting while contriving to give the impression

that I was still leading from the front.

Thus it was, to my own vague surprise, with something approaching a light heart that I hopped down from the Chimera with Jurgen, who was still lugging his beloved melta around despite its weight, and made my way up the steps of the terminal building. Faril gave us a cheerful wave of farewell from the top hatch, where he'd planted himself the moment Jurgen had boarded the vehicle in my wake, and chugged away to look for something to kill.

'Who goes there?' A couple of PDF troopers, dressed in clashing lilac and puce fatigues, which even a Slaaneshi cultist would consider in screaming bad taste, aimed shaky lasguns at me. I tilted my head a little, allowing them the best possible view of the profile most favoured by the printsheets I'd seen.

'Commissar Ciaphas Cain,' I told them grandly. 'I'd like a word with your commanding officer.' The troopers lowered their weapons, and began conferring with several of their fellows who had emerged from the wide bronze doors behind them, which were decorated with aquilae intertwined with what I took for native avians and a crude-looking flying machine or two, and through which a wide, marble-floored concourse was visible. At least that's what I discovered once I'd ventured inside. From out here there was precious little sign of any floor space at all, practically every square centimetre of it appearing to be occupied by makeshift bedrolls and listlessly slouching civilians.

'It's him. It really is,' I heard one of the troopers muttering to his companion, before turning to the nearest of the newcomers. 'Don't just stand there, get the lieutenant!'

'Much obliged,' I said, reaching the top of the flight at last, and trying not to pant audibly as the designated trooper scuttled away. The one who'd sent him, who turned out to be sporting a lance corporal's single chevron, waved vaguely in what he no doubt fondly imagined was a passable salute. I returned it crisply, and smiled in a friendly fashion. 'Can you fill me in on the situation here?'

'Well, we're just sitting tight, sir,' the man said, clearly at a loss as to how to respond, 'in case the tyranids attack.' He tried to look a little more martial. 'We're not afraid to get stuck in, you know sir, but them in charge said to leave it to the Guard while we look after the refugees.'

'Quite the best thing,' I assured him, nodding gravely, and pleasantly

surprised to find that my head wasn't throbbing quite as much as I'd expected afterwards. 'These people are the future of Periremunda. They have to be protected at all costs.'

'I hadn't really thought of it like that,' the fellow said, straightening visibly as some unsuspected residue of soldierly pride reasserted itself. Unfortunately the effect was rather spoiled a moment later as he got his first clear sight of Jurgen, and his mouth fell open like a startled squig. By that time, though, we were past the sentries and into the terminal itself, so any second thoughts he might have been having would have been far too late.

The interior of the building was, by any standard, a dismal sight, despite the garish fashion in which most of its occupants were dressed. Not as bad as some I've witnessed, of course, but pathetic enough: hollow-eyed men and women bent under the weight of unbearable loss, apathetic children too bored and hungry to do much more than sit and whine instead of enjoying their carefree years as they should have been, and, permeating everything, the endless echoing roar of hundreds of voices no one was listening to. The smell was almost as bad as the noise, even my years of Jurgen's near constant companionship having done little to prepare me for such a concentrated dose of pungent humanity.

As I advanced into the tiny area of clear space around the door, through which the ever-present wind and a few flakes of snow were drifting, I was struck by a sudden blast of heat, the press of so many bodies more than capable of overcoming Hoarfell's frigid climate. Most of the troopers I'd seen outside were sitting in front of a makeshift barrier separating this tiny cleared zone from the main concourse, apparently constructed from furnishings removed to make room for more of the ubiquitous bedrolls that carpeted the chill stone floor; desks, still bearing the sigils of one or other of the aerial transport companies that used to run regular services to other plateaux, a bench, and a recaf machine long since drained of the beverage it had once contained. Two of the PDF men were flanking a kind of gate made from the back of a cargo pallet, their lasguns held idly in their hands. From the way they kept scanning the crowd, rather than looking outwards for any sign of the tyranids, I suspected that they were more fearful of trouble from that quarter than anything the xenos might do.

And with good reason, I thought. The stench of desperation was almost as powerful as that of unwashed bodies, and I began to realise that Kasteen was right to be concerned. It would take very little to turn this sullen mass

of humanity into a rampaging mob little better than a horde of orks, and if that happened a couple of lasguns would be no protection at all.

I had little time for such dispiriting musings, however, as a slightly overweight young man in the same lurid uniform as the rest of the PDF rabble was making his way through the crowd as quickly as he could, which wasn't very. He kept mumbling apologies as he dodged round the ragtag civilians packing the place out, instead of using his elbows and the authority of his position like a real officer would have done, and I began to see why he'd been saddled with this thankless task. No doubt his superiors thought he was the least likely junior officer to be missed in the front line.

'Commissar, it's an honour.' He raised his voice to greet me while still some distance away, and a few of the nearer civilians turned to look in my direction. As they did so, recognition sparked on their faces, along with something that made my blood run almost as cold as the snow outside: a renewal of hope. Before my horrified eyes the whisper rippled outwards, more and more faces turning in my direction, all clearly believing that my unexpected arrival heralded some kind of deliverance from the echoing limbo to which they'd all been confined for so long. As soon as they realised that I couldn't provide it, things were liable to turn pretty ugly.

'Lieutenant,' I returned, projecting as much easy confidence as I could. When all else fails, I've found, stalling for time never hurts. At the worst it gives you a chance to look for the nearest exit, and draw your weapon first if you have to, and if you're really lucky something unexpected happens that you can take advantage of. 'I hope you don't mind me dropping in like this, but I heard these people were stuck a little closer to the action than seems entirely safe, and thought there might be something we could do about it.'

'I hope there is,' the chubby young officer said, looking almost as hopeful as the crowd beyond the barrier, which was drifting closer as we spoke. The troopers at the gate fastened it behind him, and tried ineffectually to wave them away. He said something else as well, but my attention was momentarily distracted by Sulla's voice in my comm-bead.

'Squad five, respond.' There was an uncharacteristic edge to her voice, and after a moment of hissing static, an uncertain voice replied.

'Five two responding. We've lost contact with team one,'⁸¹ lieutenant. It may be a vox glitch, but...'

'Fourth squad to sector five.' Irritating as I invariably found her company,

I have to admit that Sulla reacted with commendable speed. 'Possible lurker, so move with caution. Marskil, hold position and stay alert.'

'Confirm,' the corporal responded, sounding highly relieved, and a moment later Grifen's familiar clipped tone acknowledged the order too.

'On it, lieutenant.' The palms of my hands began to tingle again. If the 'nids had managed to slip behind our lines, or an undetected genestealer brood infiltrate the city, the densely packed crowd around me would attract them like orks to gunfire. Perhaps I'd be better off taking up the plight of the refugees with the local justicars, wherever they were quartered.

'We'll do everything we can, of course,' I assured the lieutenant, as though I'd heard what he'd said and gave a frak about it. I tried to recall the tactical maps I'd looked at aboard Faril's Chimera. Where in the warp was sector five anyway? Would trying to slip away just land me in the middle of another 'nid swarm, or a pack of genestealers?

'We'd really appreciate that,' the young officer told me, nodding earnestly. 'You can see for yourself that conditions here are far from ideal.' That earned a ripple of ironic laughter and a couple of catcalls from the audience we'd attracted, but to my relief none of it seemed overtly hostile. I knew just how easily that could change, however. Time for a bit of the old Cain charm, I thought, and turned to address the civilians directly.

'Citizens of Periremunda,' I said, raising my voice without apparent effort so that it cut through the babble of the crowd as easily as the noise of a battlefield. 'I can assure you that you haven't been forgotten, and neither has the tremendous sacrifice you've made in abandoning your homes for a short while to allow us to concentrate our forces more effectively against the tyranids. My presence here today should convince you of that. But I must ask you to remain patient for a little while longer. Even now the battle's raging to cleanse your world of the xenos taint.'

I couldn't have timed it better if I'd tried. Outside the massive building someone screamed, a short, choked-off cry of pain and terror, echoed a moment later by a second voice, with only a single lasgun shot between them.

I whirled around, galvanised by adrenaline, fear and old reflexes combining to override the momentary surge of nausea that accompanied the movement. I was staring at a walking nightmare, looming twice the height of a man, slashing and tearing with its claws and talons, the thin film of slush outside reddened with the shredded remains of the corporal who'd

greeted me and the trooper who'd accompanied him.

'Fire!' I shouted, drawing my weapons without thinking, and discharging a shot from my laspistol, while the PDF troopers stood around uselessly, paralysed by shock. The towering horror seemed to shimmer as it moved, and my las-bolt gouged a harmless chunk from a pillar supporting the portico. 'Protect the civilians!' Not that I gave a flying frak about them, of course, but if anything was calculated to get the PDF off their collective arses and shooting at the bloody thing it was probably that. I was right, too. The chubby lieutenant drew his sidearm at last, and the troopers finally snapped out of their stupor and started blazing away at it, to no real effect that I could see.

'Hold still, frot it!' Jurgen muttered at my side, trying to get a clear shot with the melta, but the lictor moved too fast, and the PDF kept getting in the way. Behind us the civilians scattered, howling in panic, and very sensible of them too in my opinion. A couple more of the luridly uniformed militia went down, spraying blood and entrails, and the chubby lieutenant's head bounced on the marble close to my boot, leaving a long, discoloured streak across the opalescent stone.

'Whenever you're ready,' I told my aide, unable to keep a touch of asperity from my voice, but as ever he remained immune to sarcasm.

'Almost got it,' he assured me, firing the heavy weapon at last, and vaporising a waste receptacle, a drinking fountain, and a hideously ornamented tub apparently intended to contain plants of some kind. Fortunately he managed to clip the lictor as well, charring the scything talon and rending claws on its left side into useless chunks of barbequed meat, despite its rapid evasion. That wasn't enough to kill it, of course, but it was certainly irritated. Screaming with rage it charged straight at me, bursting into the building and forcing me back against the PDF's makeshift barricade before I could get off another shot with my sidearm.

Cursing, I evaded its first rush as best I could, angling towards the side with the now useless limbs, and slashing at the steaming chitin with my chainsword. Jurgen had baked it nicely, it seemed, ichor and noxious streams of liquefied tissue leaking around the cracked plates of its hide, and the screaming blade bit deep, opening up a long slash across its flank. I knew better than to expect that to finish it though, and ducked, just as it whirled around and slashed at my head with its surviving scything claw.

'Back away, commissar!' Jurgen urged, unable to fire again for fear of

hitting me, and I cannoned into one of the piled-up desks, the blood pounding in my ears. If the blasted barricade hadn't been in the way I'd have stood half a chance, getting a decent hack at the thing's back as it barrelled on past me to start gorging on the civilians, but that wasn't going to happen now. Hemmed in by the pile of detritus, it could only be a matter of moments before I ended up as messily dead as the PDF troopers.

Suddenly, to my relieved astonishment, the thing staggered back, the fringe of tendrils hanging from its face twitching in agitation. For a moment I assumed that Jurgen's peculiar gift had somehow come to my aid again, but there seemed no reason why he should be affecting it; he certainly seemed no closer to either of us than before.⁸² Then, trying to concentrate on my immediate surroundings through the haze of nausea that seemed to be closing itself around my synapses, I became aware of something going on behind me.

The civilians, as I've said, had scattered as the feral monstrosity first burst into the terminal building, but now, if anything, their cries of panic seemed to be intensifying. Risking a quick glance over my shoulder, which left my head pounding from the sudden movement but which somehow cleared it at the same time, I saw the crowd breaking and flocking to the sides of the concourse instead of getting as far away from the lictor as possible, which had been their first, and entirely understandable, impulse. Something else had them spooked, at least as much as the monstrosity I faced, and my first thought was that more 'nids had appeared to flank us. If true, that would hardly have been unexpected, lictors tending to attract other predators in their wake once they locate a sufficient number of victims to make a concentrated attack worthwhile. But instead of a tide of gaunts, or purestrain 'stealers, I was confronted with something even more terrifying.

A trio of the refugees was advancing through the parting crowd, ignoring everyone else completely: an old man, a young woman, and a teenage boy. The woman and the boy were horrifying enough to behold, their eyes blank, and the hair around their heads waving wildly as though caught in a gale that no one else could feel, but the old man was a thousand times worse, levitating across the floor on bolts of lightning, which sparked and crashed around him. Cackling maniacally he flung out a hand, and the eldritch discharge enveloped the lictor. The creature reeled back, shrieking, and after a moment the girl muttered something, conjuring a bolt of seething plasma out of thin air. With a feral grin on her face she sent it spinning

across the concourse with a flick of her wrist, to burst against the pile of furniture I was cowering behind.

‘Avaunt, witch, in the name of the Emperor!’ A balding middle-aged man in the robes of a minor ecclesiarch stepped out of the crowd, brandishing an aquila, his voice echoing resonantly around the concourse as he began to chant the rites of exorcism. The boy turned his head, an expression of contempt on his face, and stared at him as though the man was something he’d just found on the sole of his shoe.

‘What’s the Emperor ever done for us?’ he asked, and the ecclesiarch fell to the floor as though punched in the face, writhing and screaming like a man possessed. ‘Only the True Powers can save us now.’

Panic-stricken, I glanced from one menace to another; the lictor, still wreathed in eldritch energy, striking out at random in its agony, and the trio of psykers, approaching me inexorably. At least the ’nid was out of the fight for the time being, however temporarily, so I fired at the nearest witch. The las-bolt burst against the old man’s shield of lightning, and he cackled again, clearly no saner than the average Chaos cultist.

‘This is Cain,’ I voxed frantically, shifting my aim just as the girl flung another bolt of warp plasma in my general direction. I ducked, and it impacted on the bellowing lictor, making it stagger. It might have killed the thing altogether if the ethereal discharge still crackling about it hadn’t absorbed some of the energy, but that’s Chaos for you. Even when they’re trying to co-operate, its acolytes tend to tread on one another’s toes. ‘The ’nids are inside the terminal! Psykers too!’

I cracked off a shot at plasma girl, and she staggered, a bloody wound opening up on her torso. I expected her to fall, but the arcane energies she was manipulating seemed to be sustaining her, and she merely smiled grimly, conjuring another of the hellish bolts out of thin air. As I ducked back into cover the boy caught my eye, our gazes locking, and a tidal wave of despair flooded through me. There was no point in fighting any more, that much was obvious. Their victory was certain, so was that of Chaos, and it was only a matter of time before the forces they served swept forth from the Eye of Terror to expunge the Imperium from the stars as though it had never been. Even the Emperor would fall, his soul shredded to sate the obscene appetites of daemons...

For a hideous, endless instant, I felt myself teetering on the brink of insanity, then my tenacious survival instinct kicked in, and I fought it, as

hard as I'd fought for my soul on Slawkenberg. The Ruinous Powers hadn't managed to claim it then, despite their worst efforts, and they wouldn't now, damn it.

I drew in a deep breath, headily redolent of Jurgen, and snapped back to myself, suddenly aware that my aide had joined me behind the fused and melted remains of the pile of furniture that offered us the only shelter in sight, unslinging his lasgun as he did so, clearly reluctant to use the melta again with so many innocents in the way. The impossible nightmare the young psyker had somehow planted in my mind began to dwindle away, rapidly becoming as intangible and meaningless as any other dream does on waking.

'Liar!' I roared, and the youngster's eyes widened in shock, an instant before a vengeful las-bolt from my pistol spattered his brain, along with the taint of Chaos that permeated it, over both his companions. The priest went quiet too, apparently no longer under the dreamcaster's baleful influence, although whether he eventually recovered his wits I have no idea.

The other two slowed their advance, apparently no longer quite as sure as they had been of victory, and the girl staggered a little, as though beginning to feel the effect of her wound. The old man seemed a little closer to the floor now too, the eldritch energies crackling around him not quite as potent as they had been, and I began to feel a flare of hope. Jurgen, it seemed, was disrupting their powers even at this distance. A desperate idea began to form.

'We need to close with them,' I said, and Jurgen nodded, accepting this apparently suicidal order as calmly as if I'd just asked for a bowl of tanna.

'Ready when you are, sir,' he assured me, producing what looked like an unfeasibly large bayonet from the collection of equipment he was habitually festooned with, and clipping it to the barrel of his gun with precise and economical movements.

'I never doubted it,' I assured him, and we popped off another couple of shots each to distract the witches again. Behind us the lictor staggered into the frame of the door, lashing out randomly with its rending claws and tearing a jagged lump of bronze out of it, while the surviving PDF troopers continued to pepper its immediate surroundings with badly aimed lasbolts. 'Go!'

We scrambled over the remains of the barricade, ripping the hem of my greatcoat in the process, and charged towards the astonished heretics, firing

as we went. Both reeled back a pace or two under the impact of the hail of lasbolts, but their strange immunity to the full effect of them seemed to hold until we'd closed to within a handful of yards. The girl, her face panic-stricken, tried to conjure another ball of seething destruction into existence, but it fizzled and vanished in the air between us, and the old man fell suddenly to the floor as his shield of lightning abruptly disappeared. With a bellow of anger and revulsion I swiped his head from his shoulders with my chainsword before he had a chance to react, and watched it bounce a couple of times before coming to rest, glaring back at me in posthumous indignation.

'How...?' the girl started to ask, before it apparently began to dawn on her that most of her torso was missing. Her knees buckled, an expression of stunned incomprehension flickered briefly across her face, and the light went out of her eyes. As she slumped to the floor, the grimace of baffled surprise fading into the slackness of death, most of the civilians around us made the sign of the aquila and spat on the three twitching bodies.

'Well done, Jurgen,' I said, breathing hard. But of course it wasn't over yet. The death of the psykers had released the lictor from their unnatural influence, and it lunged back into the attack, flinging aside the pile of furniture that barred its way in its eagerness to get to us.

Jurgen and I braced ourselves to meet the monster's charge, while the civilians scattered around us like gretchin and the PDF troopers hovered irresolute, apparently afraid to shoot at it again in case they hit us. Before we could fire our own weapons, though, the roar of a powerful engine echoed through the cavernous building and a Chimera appeared from nowhere, bouncing up the steps and ricocheting off the much-abused doors with a sound like a bell tower collapsing. Grifen's head and shoulders were visible, sticking through the top hatch, and she waved as she caught sight of us.

'Sorry we took so long getting here,' she voxed. 'Our driver broke his arm when a carnifex tried to overturn us, and it took a moment to get someone else on the controls.'

'Your timing's impeccable,' I assured her, wondering how she expected to deal with the chitinous horror still limping towards us at an astonishing rate despite its wounds. The Chimera's heavy bolters would have been lethal to the civilians cluttering up the place if she'd tried to use them, and the hull-mounted lasguns were all positioned to cover its flanks. I soon had my

answer, though. Instead of stopping to disembark the troopers, as I'd expected, the blocky vehicle simply roared on into the concourse, flattening the remains of the barricade as it came, and reducing the astonished lictor to a large, unpleasant stain beneath its treads before it had a chance to react. 'Nice driving, Magot.'

'You're welcome, commissar,' the familiar cheerful tones of one of my perennial disciplinary problems assured me, before taking on a faintly puzzled air. 'How did you know it was me?'

'Lucky guess,' I told her, feeling a sudden overwhelming urge to sit down. The civilians were all babbling at me, apparently taking my desperate charge at the psykers as confirmation of everything they'd ever heard about my legendary courage under fire, my head was pounding again, and nothing around me seemed to make any sense at all.

Well, almost nothing. Jurgen coughed diffidently, and produced a thermal flask from somewhere among his collection of pouches.

'Tanna, sir?' he suggested. Without thinking I nodded, then winced at the inevitable result.

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, once my vision had cleared again. 'I think we've earned it.'



TWENTY-THREE

‘Are you sure about this?’ I asked, masking my considerable surprise with some difficulty.

Keesh nodded. ‘Absolutely. It took a bit of digging once we’d identified your rogue psykers, but we’ve been able to establish their movements for the last few years with a fair degree of accuracy.’ He brought up the data on the hololith in the centre of the conference table, and Amberley nodded, as though it merely confirmed something she’d long suspected. ‘They have a number of associates in common, of course, as you’d expect, but nothing away from their home plateau except this.’

‘It could just be a coincidence,’ I said, despite the tingling in the palms of my hands that insisted otherwise. ‘There are still gaps in the records.’

‘That’s hardly surprising under the circumstances,’ Amberley pointed out mildly. Although it seemed we had the tyrannids on the run at last, having held on to all the major population centres and retaken a few of the ones they’d overrun, the war was still a long way from being over. The Navy had finally broken the back of the hive fleet, forcing what was left of it to withdraw in search of easier pickings, and the rain of spores had ceased almost a week ago. Nevertheless there were more than enough of the creatures left on the ground to pose a considerable problem for the Guard and what was left of the PDF for a long time to come. Even when the last of the plateaux were finally cleared, we’d still have the uncountable numbers of ravaging organisms swarming in the deserts between them to deal with.

At least that problem was diminishing by the day. Now that they’d run out of bioships to kill the Navy were doing their best to pick off the largest concentrations from orbit, paying particular attention to any digestion pools capable of spawning reinforcements. Orbital bombardment could only

achieve so much against so widely dispersed an enemy, though, and the last die-hard survivors would have to be tracked down and finished off the old-fashioned way. That wouldn't be my problem though, thank the Emperor. Ordinary humans couldn't even hope to survive in that hellish environment, let alone fight in it, and the honour of finally declaring Periremunda free of the xenos taint would fall to one of the Astartes Chapters.

I nodded in agreement, still pleasantly surprised by the lack of nausea the motion produced. I hadn't exactly been resting in the couple of weeks since my nerve-shredding encounter in the star port terminal, but I hadn't seen much actual combat either, dividing the bulk of my time between the routine tasks of my office, pursuing my request for an investigation of the Gavarronian PDF now things had become quiet enough to devote some attention to the matter, and evading the local pictcasts, which were bordering on hagiography these days, after what everyone seemed determined to believe was my heroic single-handed defence of a thousand civilians against a horde of ravening tyranids and a coven of Chaos worshippers.

Keesh's request for a private meeting to discuss some highly sensitive matters had come as something of a surprise (as had Amberley's presence in the conference chamber, which had been an even greater, and far more welcome, one), which I'd seized on gratefully, hoping that decamping to Principia Mons without warning would at least allow me to get through the next couple of days without some idiot shoving an imagifer in my face and asking me to comment on some momentous issue I'd never heard about before.

'Quite true,' I said. The bulk of the records I was looking at had been recovered from Skywest⁸³ by an elite squad of justicars under Nyte's personal supervision within hours of the 'nids being driven off from there, and had been classified so secret I wasn't entirely sure that even Zyvan was allowed to look at them.⁸⁴ I nodded at several names, linked to the three we were interested in by thin red lines. 'Are any of these people available for questioning?'

'Not unless you want to stick your head down a tyranid's throat and shout "anyone at home?"' Amberley said dryly.

Keesh looked mildly disapproving of the note of levity creeping into the proceedings. 'Our best indications are that none of them survived the tyranid assault on Skywest,' he said primly, 'but we can still draw certain

inferences from the way they appear to have interacted.'

'A Chaos cult,' I said, recognising the signs. 'Or at least a local cell of one.'

Amberley nodded, looking a little surprised at the speed of my deduction, but I'd encountered such things often enough before to realise what I was looking at almost at once.

'That would be my interpretation too,' Keesh said. 'Although it does seem rather unusual for a group that small to have three members proficient in warcraft.' He directed an enquiring look at the inquisitor.

'It does,' Amberley confirmed. 'Which is why the other lead should be followed up as quickly as possible.' She looked at me, smiling cheerfully, and I tried to suppress a shiver of apprehension. 'Fortunately Ciaphas has given us the perfect opportunity to do just that.'

'I have?' I asked. I indicated the hololith. 'I grant you that they all visited Gavarrone at least once in the past five years, but my business there is entirely with the PDF.' After a lot of memos, and some unashamed trading on my reputation to get things moving, I'd finally got the Munitorum to agree that I might as well follow up the incident on Aceralbaterra myself in the absence of any local commissar capable of handling the case.⁸⁵ As nothing else had happened in the meantime to raise any questions about the local militia's loyalty the chances were it was going to turn out to be a complete waste of time after all, but at least it would keep me comfortably away from the mopping up operation for a day or two. 'I don't see how I can follow this up as well.'

'You won't have to,' Amberley assured me. 'But your enquiry into the friendly fire incident will be the perfect cover for a bit of discreet poking around into some other matters too.'

'Like what?' I asked, feeling less and less happy.

Amberley looked at me like one of my old schola tutors pointing out that I'd missed something obvious. 'Well, you're assuming that if the PDF on Gavarrone has been penetrated, it's by genestealer hybrids. That is perfectly possible, of course, but the Imperium has other hidden enemies too, don't forget.'

'You really think there's a Chaos cult hiding out in the middle of an Ecclesiarchy fiefdom?' I asked, unable to keep a note of incredulity out of my voice.

Amberley shrugged. 'Why not?' she asked.

I felt my jaw working spasmodically for a moment before I could articulate a coherent reply. 'Well for one thing, Eglantine and her singing harpies would have burned the lot of them for heretics years ago,' I pointed out reasonably.

Amberley merely shrugged again. 'If they'd even noticed,' she said, completely unperturbed by my manifest incredulity. 'In my experience people like her tend to take an awful lot for granted.'

'Well, I'll let you know if I find anything,' I said, hoping to move the conversation on to safer ground. Amberley's smile stretched, and I felt the shiver of apprehension grow stronger.

'There won't be any need for that,' she assured me happily. 'I'll be coming along too.' Then she smiled coquettishly. 'I've always thought I look good in a uniform.'

Well, she was right about that anyway, which was something of a consolation. She grinned at me happily from beneath a standard issue Valhallan uniform cap, its dark fur contrasting well with her pale complexion and blonde hair. The greatcoat that went with it was unfastened, revealing well-filled fatigues beneath, but an absence of body armour that had surprised me at first. Then again, this wasn't supposed to be a combat assignment. Nevertheless, I had no doubt that she'd be as discreetly protected as she had been on Gravalax, despite the absence of any visible precautions.

'How do I look?' she asked, taking a sip of amasec from the crystal goblet in her hand.

We were sitting in the forward compartment of her Aquila, which had been repainted for the occasion in the drab livery of the Munitorum, and which now looked, from the outside at least, like a utility cargo hauler that hadn't seen the inside of a maintenance bay since the Gothic Wars. Precisely the kind of thing, in other words, that I might have requisitioned to transport me on a low priority administrative errand. (But it would have been considerably less comfortable, of course, not to mention lacking in cunningly concealed firepower.)

'Very fetching,' I assured her, accurately enough. 'You ought to pass for a soldier, if no one looks too closely.' That was more or less true of the rest of them as well, I supposed. After all, next to Jurgen, even Simeon looked like a storm trooper. With his implants hidden beneath the traditional Valhallan

greatcoat and hat he looked more human than I'd ever seen him, a massive dose of some tranquiliser or other stilling the usual range of twitches and tics. Pelton looked the part too, his years in the Arbites no doubt contributing to the air of disciplined efficiency the uniform lent him.

The weak link, of course, was Zemelda, who, try as she might, would never look like anything other than a civilian in borrowed clothes to anyone familiar with the Imperial Guard. She'd done her best, though, even returning her hair to its natural colour for the occasion, which turned out to be a rather pleasant shade of brown. Faced with Amberley's implacable determination to bring her along I'd bowed to the inevitable, merely suggesting that we add a bandage or two to give the impression that she'd recently suffered a head wound in action. Anyone noticing some oddity of posture or behaviour might just ascribe it to the kind of disorientation I'd become all too familiar with myself in the last couple of weeks. The hope was a faint one, admittedly, but since we were going to be dealing with PDF personnel, who were barely a step up from civilians in uniform themselves, we might just get away with it.

Needless to say Zemelda was just as thrilled at this chance to dress up and play act as she had been when asked to impersonate a lady's maid, and had to be prevailed upon in no uncertain terms not to wince and limp like a mummer in a mystery play.⁸⁶ At least, to my intense relief, Rakel and Yanbel had both been left behind, since even Amberley's relentless optimism had balked at the prospect of successfully disguising either of them as soldiers.

I sipped my own amasec, trying to still the flutter of apprehension in my stomach. She knew what she was doing, of course, I took that for granted; the trouble was, I had no idea of what that might be. The theory certainly seemed sound enough: infiltrate her people in the guise of my escort, which ought to raise few eyebrows, since taking one was well within the bounds of established protocol for the kind of investigation I was pursuing. After all, if the Gavarronians did turn out to be riddled with hybrids, I could hardly rely on their own comrades to back me up in a physical confrontation.

With that grim possibility in mind I'd intended bringing Lustig or Grifen's squad with me, until Amberley had proposed this imposture, and truth to tell I would still have preferred to do so. I had no doubt of her people's fighting ability if push came to shove, but I hadn't been in action with them

as often as I had with the Valhallans, and I couldn't rely on them to cover my back in quite the same way. Their primary loyalty would be to Amberley, the Inquisition, and whatever mission she was on. I had no doubt at all that if a conflict of interest arose they'd hang me out to dry without a second's hesitation. Not only that, I still had no more than the vaguest idea of what they might be doing once we'd arrived at our destination, and I have to admit that it was probably just as well. If I had realised what they were hoping to find, you can be sure I'd have been even more apprehensive than I already was.

At least I knew I could trust Jurgen implicitly, and I resolved to stick as closely to him as I could, despite the obvious disadvantages of doing so. He'd accepted the necessity of leaving his favourite toy behind, a melta hardly being the kind of thing a commissar's aide carries around routinely on a fact-finding mission, but had been manifestly unhappy about ditching it, no doubt anticipating the possibility of further trouble. (Which, given the way things had gone since we'd arrived on this Emperor-forsaken joke of nature, I could hardly fault him for.) Denied the solace of some serious firepower he remained slumped in his seat, his lasgun cradled on his knees, obsessively checking the functioning of every component and reciting the appropriate litany from the *Book of Armaments* repeatedly under his breath. At least it kept his mind off his usual airsickness, so I thanked the Emperor for small mercies, and tried to get a picture of the fiefdom of Gavarrone as Pontius circled widely around it, preparing to bring the shuttle in to land on the pad in the main PDF compound.

My first impression was one of neatness, in marked contrast to the other plateaux I'd flown into since my arrival on Periremunda, the usual disorderly sprawl of human habitation or untrammelled nature tidied to within an inch of its life. Broad, straight avenues cut through well-tended fields in which any weeds or wildflowers with the temerity to stick their heads above the soil would be expunged as ruthlessly as heretics, bordered by squared-off hedges whose corners seemed to form perfect right angles. The town we passed over was laid out with an equal degree of geometric precision, its streets forming a precise grid, leading naturally to the vast square in its centre where the temple of the Emperor soared majestically skyward in a positive effusion of buttresses, crenelations, and superfluous statuary.

'It's like a toy town,' Zemelda said, a note of disapproval in her voice, no

doubt comparing it unfavourably to the cosy human confusion of Principia Mons, and I nodded in agreement. The relentless perfection of it all, no doubt intended to display devotion to Him on Earth in the little details of everyday life, struck me as sterile, as alien to the cluttered human psyche as the smooth functionality of a tau sept.⁸⁷ She craned her neck for a better view of something in the distance. 'Is that where we're going?'

'No.' Amberley shook her head. 'That's the convent. We're putting down on the PDF landing field.'

Despite myself I was unable to resist turning my gaze in the direction they were looking. The Order of the White Rose, it seemed, was not exactly constrained by vows of poverty. The convent looked more like the country estate of some provincial nobleman on an agri-world somewhere, long white buildings rising no more than three storeys from the ground forming a complex series of interlocking quadrangles in which fountains played and flowers nodded gently in the breeze. Other, larger squares clearly had more utilitarian purposes, sisters in power armour drilling or practising combat techniques with a precision Sergeant Lermie⁸⁸ would have nodded grudging approval of, or full of glossy black Rhinos ornamented with votive iconography that made them look more like self-propelled chapels than practical AFVs. The amount of detail I could make out was astonishing, given that our destination was supposed to be several kilometres from the place, and I felt a familiar tingling sensation beneath my gloves.

'Aren't we getting a bit close to their airspace?' I asked, and Amberley nodded.

'We are,' she agreed, sounding more intrigued than alarmed by this development, and voxed the cockpit. 'Pontius, what's going on?'

'Inquisitor?' Our pilot sounded genuinely baffled by the question. 'I'm following the co-ordinates the local traffic controller gave me. Do you want me to break off our approach?'

'No, not yet.' Amberley nodded thoughtfully, as if something she strongly suspected had just been confirmed. 'Let's play this one out, and see what happens.' She looked at me, and grinned. 'I think he's just made his first mistake,' she said, a palpable tone of satisfaction in her voice. 'You must really have got him rattled.'

'Who?' I asked. 'Metheius?' Amberley nodded again.

'Him too, probably,' she agreed. That old, and profoundly disagreeable, sensation of not being told everything that was going on began to grow in

me again, but there was no sense in letting my disquiet show, so I merely glanced across to where Jurgen was sitting. He seemed satisfied with the condition of his lasgun at last, and snapped the power cell into place with a finality that no doubt comforted us both.

‘We’re on the final approach, ma’am,’ Pontius voxed a moment or two later, and I glanced outside again, trying to orientate myself. The wide, close-clipped lawns surrounding the convent suddenly vanished, along with everything else except a panorama of desert impossibly far below, and I suddenly realised that they bordered the sheer drop of the plateau edge. Unlike the star port on Hoarfell, however, there was no fence to prevent an incautious misstep pitching an unfortunate stroller into infinity, and not for the first time I found myself wondering if the blessed sisters were a couple of beads short of a rosary.⁸⁹ I just had time to notice a brief, actinic flicker in the lowering clouds to our south-west, like the largest bolt of lightning imaginable, before the smooth green grass was back below us, much closer this time. We passed low over a grove of fruit trees, whose branches waved lazily in the breeze from our passing, and skimmed a couple of red-tiled roofs, in which repeating motifs of aquilae and fleur de lys had been picked out in contrasting hues.

‘We’re on final approach,’ Pontius told us, a moment before arresting our forward motion entirely, and the familiar hollow sensation in the pit of my stomach combined with Jurgen’s audible discomfiture to inform me that we were dropping vertically towards the landing field. White walls rose past the viewports, to enclose us on all sides, and a moment later a faint bump echoed through the fuselage as our landing gear made contact with the surface of the pad. Pontius powered down the engines.

‘Right,’ Amberley said, standing decisively, ‘let’s go and see what all this is about.’ I nodded, following suit.

‘Jurgen,’ I said, and waited for my aide to take up his usual position at my shoulder, before savouring my small moment of self-assertion. I raised a hand to forestall Amberley from leading the way out of the passenger compartment. ‘Carry on, corporal,’ I instructed.

‘Commissar.’ She saluted briskly, falling into the role she’d assumed at once with barely a hint of amusement, and formed the others up into a passable impersonation of a short team,⁹⁰ which followed me down the ramp, their lasguns at the port. Jurgen had slung his own weapon, as was his habit on these occasions, leaving his hands free to respond more readily to

any request I might make of him.

We emerged onto a wide landing pad, surrounded by the white buildings of the convent, and a gaggle of power-armoured sisters strode forward to meet us, bolters at the ready. Stilling the growing sense of apprehension knotting my stomach I nodded an affable greeting, and waited for them to move within earshot.

As our feet hit the rockcrete Pontius powered up his engines again, and the Aquila rose gently into the air behind us. The immediate departure of our transport shuttle would be perfectly normal if we were all who we purported to be, and the last thing we wanted to do was give our unseen adversaries (if they even existed) the smallest hint that there was anything out of the ordinary about my errand. Instead of returning to Principia Mons, however, Pontius would loiter in the immediate vicinity of Gavarrone, safely below the rim of the plateau, in the blind spot of any local auspex systems that might reveal his whereabouts.

As the roar of his engines faded I became aware of a faint rumbling in the distance, like far off artillery, and remembered the flash of light I'd seen from the air.

'Thunder?' Jurgen asked, glancing suspiciously up at the sky.

Amberley shook her head. 'The Navy,' she said. 'There must be a large concentration of 'nids around here somewhere.'

'Lovely,' I muttered under my breath, eliciting a brief, unmilitary grin from the disguised inquisitor, before her cover reasserted itself. Assuming an air of easy confidence I strode forward, addressing the Sister Superior of the battle-sisters approaching us, and raised my hand in formal greeting.

'Commissar.' The woman returned the gesture curtly, her ash blonde fringe bobbing as she did so, and I noticed that the *fleur de lys* tattoo on her right cheek was bisected by a thin white line of healed scar tissue. This, as much as her manner, marked her out as a veteran warrior, and someone not to be trifled with. Well, fair enough, so was I. 'Welcome to the Convent of the White Rose.' Her eyes flickered past me to Amberley and her entourage, evaluating any potential threat they might have posed, and clearly coming to the conclusion that they didn't present much of one. 'I wasn't informed that there would be others in your party.'

'My aide, Gunner Jurgen,' I said, indicating him with an offhand wave. 'He always accompanies me on official business.' I glanced at Amberley, as though barely aware of who she was. 'This is Corporal Vail, commanding

my escort detail.'

'Ma'am,' Amberley said, saluting, and, to my faint surprise, falling into a perfect parade rest as though waiting for further orders. The others all remained at the port, their guns ready, but not yet aimed, which was just as well considering we were outnumbered by two to one and the sisters had power armour and bolters.

'This is something of an unexpected pleasure,' I said, determined to retain the initiative. 'I was given to understand that we would be landing at the PDF garrison.'

'The decision to divert you here was taken at the highest level,' the battlesister assured me, with a faintly reverential air that stirred the hackles on the back of my neck. Zyvan and Keesh were certainly both under the impression that we were sticking to the original plan, and, apart from Amberley, I wasn't aware of any higher authority on the planet. But then the Ecclesiarchy tended to play entirely by their own rules, and I began to wonder if barging into one of their pocket kingdoms uninvited had been quite such a good idea after all. The armoured woman turned, gesturing to us all to follow, and surrounded as we were by heavily armed fanatics I was understandably disinclined to argue the point. 'If you'll come with me, the inquisitor will explain everything.'



TWENTY-FOUR

‘The inquisitor?’ I echoed, glancing briefly in Amberley’s direction in spite of myself, but she continued to play the part of the stolid Valhallan non-com without missing a beat, and no one else seemed to notice my momentary lapse. The Sister Superior nodded as I fell into step beside her, the rest of her squad forming up around our little group in a manner that, despite the appearance of an honour guard, I had no doubt at all would erupt in a hail of bolter fire the moment we did anything they construed as untoward, and we set off across the landing field towards a wide doorway in one of the buildings surrounding us.

The air seemed remarkably fresh, I recall, no doubt because of our proximity to the brink of the plateau, scented with the fragrances of newly clipped grass and fruit blossom, which were quite readily discernible even over the earthier aroma of Jurgen. At this altitude the sun was clear and bright, with a residue of warmth, although the breeze carried a chill that quite justified my greatcoat and those of my companions. Real Valhallans would have disdained the heavy garments of course, preferring shirtsleeves until there was at least a decent coating of frost over everything, but the sisters seemed mercifully ignorant of the fact.

‘His presence here is a secret,’ she explained, as though that was obvious. ‘I’m sure you understand the need for discretion in these matters.’

‘Indeed I do,’ I said, nodding gravely, despite the vortex of confusion into which my mind had just been plunged. Amberley didn’t seem overly surprised at this development, which led me to suspect, quite correctly as it turned out, that she’d been aware of this other inquisitor’s presence all along. I’d gathered the impression from some of the remarks she’d made since our association began that not everyone in the inquisition was

necessarily quoting from the same sermon, so to speak, but it had never occurred to me until then that her real target on Periremunda might be one of her own colleagues. If that was indeed the case, of course. Suppressing my confusion as best I could, I tried to sound as calm and matter-of-fact as my hostess. 'Battles have been won or lost before now thanks to a careless word.'

'Well said,' a new voice chimed in, as we entered a large marble atrium festooned with icons of the Emperor, and the inevitable *fleur de lys*, the sight of which I was beginning to feel heartily sick of. The speaker was a well-muscled man with brown hair and eyes, who appeared to be in early middle age, although I'd seen too many centenarians who looked half that thanks to an over-enthusiasm for juvenat treatments to take his physical appearance as a reliable indicator of how old he might actually have been. As our little cavalcade entered the building he rose from a bench next to a trellis choked with sweet-smelling roses the colour of fresh fallen snow to greet us, smiling affably, and stuck out a hand for me to shake. 'I can see your reputation is hardly exaggerated.'

'Rather more than you might think,' I replied, taking it with confidence, as my augmetic fingers would be more than adequate to counter any subtle attempts to disconcert me by applying excess pressure. His handshake was firm and decisive, but no more than that. Evidently our peculiar host felt he had no need to resort to childish games to establish his status. To my surprise he chuckled as he let go, as though I'd just said something inordinately witty.

'Which is precisely what I would have expected a man like you to say.' He smoothed the front of his neat black tabard, which had become slightly crumpled, and nodded to the Sister Superior. 'Sister Caritas, could you see to it that the commissar's friends are taken care of? There must be something acceptable to the soldierly palate in the refectory, I would have thought.'

'Most considerate,' I said, determined not to seem in the slightest bit disconcerted by anything that happened here, even though I was understandably reluctant to be parted from Amberley at this juncture. After all, she knew a great deal more about what was going on than I did. 'But don't take them too far. We have business at the PDF garrison, and I'll need them when I get there.'

'They'll be waiting when you're ready to leave,' the strange inquisitor

assured me. I nodded.

‘Dismissed,’ I told Amberley, and she saluted again.

‘Commissar.’ She turned to the others, adopting the tone of a junior NCO admonishing her subordinates as accurately as if she’d been one since the First Founding. ‘Right, we’re all guests in a house of the Emperor, so I expect you to act like it. Show respect to the sisters, mind your manners, and watch your frakking language.’

‘Yes, corporal,’ Pelton said seriously, and the others nodded, still playing their parts to the hilt. As they formed up to file out, I gestured to Jurgen to remain.

‘This way,’ Sister Caritas said, her lips compressed into a thin line of disapproval, and led the little group of pseudo-Valhallans away, the rest of her squad, to my unspoken relief, going with them. The inquisitor glanced at Jurgen, and raised an eyebrow.

‘Jurgen’s my personal aide,’ I explained blandly. ‘His security clearance is as high as my own.’

After a moment the black-clad man nodded, a hint of amusement in his eyes. ‘Of course, keep him to hand by all means. I’d probably want a little backup myself in your position.’ He inclined his head towards an archway leading deeper inside the complex. ‘Perhaps you’d appreciate some lunch while we talk.’

‘I’d certainly appreciate an explanation or two,’ I said, keeping my cards as close to my chest as possible. I had no doubt that, despite his affable demeanour, this fellow was extremely dangerous. Without Amberley to provide me with a lead, my best course of action would be to encourage him to talk, and hope to the Golden Throne that I’d be able to make some sense of the situation without giving away just how little I really knew about what was going on. ‘Who you are and why you’ve diverted me here would be a reasonable place to start.’

‘My dear fellow, how very remiss of me. Inquisitor Killian, of the Ordo Hereticus.’ We continued to walk as we spoke, navigating a labyrinth of corridors wide enough to have driven a Salamander down with little difficulty. Now my peculiar host ushered me through a doorway into what was evidently a suite of guest rooms, surprisingly well appointed for so austere an institution. Large sliding doors at one end of the lounge gave on to a lawn fringed with more rose bushes, and he gestured towards it a trifle hastily as Jurgen followed us into the room, preceded as always by his

personal aroma. 'Perhaps you'd care to dine *al fresco*?'

'As you wish,' I said blandly, following him into the garden. As I did so something hurtled past my head, a servo skull with a silver soup tureen slung incongruously beneath it, and I turned to follow it suspiciously as it settled over a wrought iron table in the middle of a sweet-scented arbour to deposit its burden. Someone was already sitting there, a blank-visaged tech-priest, who stood slowly as we approached. Killian noted my reaction with a wry smile.

'These ones are completely harmless,' he assured me. He gestured towards the tech-priest. 'Since you insist on being accompanied by your associate, I'm sure you won't mind extending me the same courtesy.'

'Of course not,' I told him. I extended my hand, which to my quiet relief the tech-priest shook with his own, rather than one of the mechadendrites wavering gently over his shoulders. 'The elusive magister Metheius, I presume.' The guess was evidently a good one, as the tech-priest flinched back as I spoke, and shot a startled look at Killian from under the cowl of his robe. There wasn't enough flesh left on his face to form a surprised expression, but then he hardly needed to after a reaction like that.

'You've been talking to Lazurus, I take it,' Killian said, settling into one of the vacant chairs around the table, and motioning for me to sit. Still playing out the charade of good manners I did so, taking the opportunity of making sure my chainsword was loose in its scabbard as I moved it out of the way. Killian noticed the tiny movement, but chose to ignore it, gesturing instead to the selection of viands laid out between us. 'Can I offer you a slice of cottleston pie?'

'We've exchanged a few words,' I admitted blandly, declining the platter he held out towards me. 'At the briefing your assassin disrupted. I take it he was one of yours?' It was a reasonable guess, the Ordo Hereticus dealing with witches and rogue psykers as a matter of course, and far more likely than most other Imperial institutions to have access to their sanctioned counterparts.

'He was,' Killian admitted, without a moment's embarrassment. He took the lid off the tureen, and ladled out a bowlful of groxtail soup, which he proceeded to sip at appreciatively. 'Are you sure you won't try some of this? It's rather good. They add some local herb to it, grows wild on a few of the lower plateaux. Might as well enjoy it while we can, I don't suppose there's much left of it now the tyranids have been through there.'

‘At the risk of seeming a little discourteous,’ I said carefully, ‘I’m not entirely sanguine about eating anything offered to me by a man who’s already made several attempts on my life.’

‘No offence taken,’ Killian assured me. ‘But if I still wanted you dead, I would just have ordered the sisters to take care of it as soon as you stepped off the shuttle. I doubt that even a man of your formidable fighting prowess could have subdued the entire convent.’

Well, that sounded reasonable enough, and I was getting pretty hungry by that point, so I put my doubts aside and began to dig in, finding the meal just as pleasant as my strange host had promised. To my surprise Jurgen refused almost everything other than some cold meat in bread, standing close enough behind my back to decorate it with a steady drizzle of crumbs, his lasgun hanging loose across his shoulder where he could seize the grip and swing it around to fire from the hip in an instant, a party trick that had taken more than one foe by fatal surprise before now. Metheius, of course, didn’t eat a thing.

‘I’m glad to hear you’ve changed your mind,’ I said, slipping a slice of the pie onto my plate. By this point he’d eaten some himself, which wasn’t an infallible indication that it was harmless of course, but it definitely seemed safer than anything I hadn’t seen him touch yet. ‘Although I’m still rather vague about why you wanted to kill me in the first place.’ Killian waved expansively, and swallowed a mouthful of soup.

‘My dear Cain, we’re both men of the galaxy. There’s no need to pretend ignorance, although I’m sure Lazurus would be delighted to hear how diligently you’re sticking to your cover story. He sought your aid as soon as he realised you were on Periremunda, didn’t he?’

‘He spoke to me at the earliest possible opportunity,’ I said carefully, sticking as close to the truth as I could. I was as sure as I could be that the affable lunatic across the table wasn’t a psyker himself, or he would undoubtedly have reacted as violently to Jurgen’s presence as Rakel usually did, so I had no fear that he’d be able to pull the information he wanted directly from my own mind. But he was undoubtedly as skilled as Amberley at reading body language, and there was no telling what biometric monitoring systems Metheius might have been enhanced with, so there was no point in pushing my luck by telling outright lies unless I really had to. Killian nodded pensively. ‘He seemed rather anxious to establish the whereabouts of your friend here.’

‘I thought so,’ he said, clearly believing, as I’d intended, that I’d been in contact with Lazurus for some time before our first meeting in the Arbites building, which in itself was significant. Equally clearly he had no idea of Amberley’s presence on Periremunda. ‘He knew you’d been on Perlia, so he must have thought he could trust you with the secret.’

‘I know a little more than I used to about what I found in the Valley of Daemons,’ I admitted. I gave Metheius a hard look. ‘And who was evidently responsible.’ I redirected my gaze to Killian. ‘Although I must admit I’m surprised to find you giving sanctuary to a traitor. I thought the Inquisition and the Adeptus Mechanicus were supposed to be partners in the project.’

‘Part of the Inquisition,’ Killian explained, spreading ackenberry preserve on a freshly toasted florn cake. He took a bite, and regarded me sombrely as he chewed and swallowed, evidently marshalling his thoughts. ‘It’s rather hard to explain to an outsider, but, despite what you might have been led to believe, the Inquisition is far from united in its battle against the malign forces threatening the Imperium.’ This much I already knew from Amberley, of course, but I contrived to look vaguely surprised, which, as I’d intended, encouraged him to go on. ‘The artefact recovered on Perlia was given into the custody of the Ordo Xenos, which was the right and proper course of action at the time, but after Metheius discovered its most striking property, clearly it became a matter for the Ordo Hereticus.’

‘I imagine there was some debate over the matter,’ I said, prompting him to continue, and wondering what in the name of the Emperor he was talking about.

Metheius nodded. ‘There was. Several of the tech-priests agreed with me, that the Ordo Hereticus should be informed at once, although the majority favoured retaining the backing of the Ordo Xenos, unwilling to risk a confrontation over the issue.’ His voice took on a timbre of agitation quite at odds with the measured tones I normally associated with one of his calling. ‘I could scarcely believe their stupidity! The key to eradicating the scourge of Chaos from the galaxy was in our hands at last, and still they procrastinated! I took it upon myself to inform Inquisitor Killian of what we’d discovered, certain from what I knew of him that he’d make use of this devastating weapon against the Great Enemy at the earliest opportunity.’

‘You’d met before, then, I take it,’ I said, wondering what in the warp he

was babbling about. If he really had discovered what this *shadowlight* thing did, and it was as dangerous as it sounded, using it seemed like a very bad idea indeed to me.

‘We had,’ Killian confirmed. ‘Metheius had helped me eradicate a heretical cult among the tech-priests of a minor astropathic waystation some years before, and was aware of my commitment to using every weapon to hand in our struggle for survival.’

‘I see,’ I said, the pieces beginning to fall into place at last. ‘So you tried to poke your oar in, and the Ordo Xenos told you to go frot yourself.’ That might have seemed an incautious thing to say, but I’ve found time and again that pricking someone’s pride with an unexpectedly blunt remark can often get them to reveal more than they intended to.

‘Something like that,’ Killian admitted. He shrugged. ‘Unfortunately all my intervention achieved was tipping them off to the fact that something was going on in the Valley of Daemons that the tech-priests there were too scared to pass on. No doubt they would have dispatched an inspection team to resolve the matter, if the orks hadn’t already invaded the place.’

‘I remember,’ I said grimly. Even after all these years, and all the other horrors I’d seen since, the desperate struggle to survive what I’d experienced on that unhappy world still surfaced in my dreams from time to time.

‘It was like a sign from the Emperor,’ Killian said, the light of something not entirely sane flickering at the back of his eyes. ‘I couldn’t let the artefact fall into orkish hands, and with it in my possession I knew I could cleanse the galaxy in a way the purblind fainthearts of the Ordo Xenos would never dare to even imagine.’

‘So you went in and took it,’ I said. Killian nodded, spraying florn cake crumbs in his earnestness with almost as much abandon as my aide.

‘It was the Emperor’s will,’ he said simply. ‘I had the means, and the determination. We stormed the place before the cowards and traitors even knew we were coming, and struck them down in His holy name.’

‘You used the sisters,’ I said, remembering the bolter wounds I’d seen in the bodies of the slain, and the surgical precision of the strike. Despite the calmness of my outer demeanour, my blood ran colder than a Valhallan shower at the sudden realisation. There must have been hundreds of warriors in the convent, all of them unquestioningly loyal to this maniac. If we didn’t tread very carefully indeed, our chances of getting out alive were

about as great as teaching an ork to tap-dance.

Killian nodded. 'The Order of the White Rose has been a loyal ally in our purges and wars of faith for millennia,' he said. 'They did all that was asked of them in His glorious name.'

'Nothing very glorious about gunning down unarmed cogboys if you ask me,' I said, and Metheius sighed.

'It was necessary. All traces of my work had to be expunged, if we were to continue it successfully in secret.'

'In Hell's Edge,' I said, and Killian nodded, looking as absurdly pleased as if I'd just performed some minor conjuring trick.

'So you found our old bolthole. That was remarkably resourceful of you.'

'Unfortunately,' I said, 'by the time I got there the 'nids had found it first.'

'They had,' Killian admitted. 'The sisters were barely able to extract us in time.'

'And the miners?' I asked, already knowing the answer.

Killian shook his head regretfully.

'We only had room for Metheius and his team. Most unfortunate. We had to shoot a few of the civilians who tried to get their children aboard, and the rest got quite abusive.'

'How very distressing for you,' I said dryly. Emperor knows, far better men than me have fallen on the field of battle while I looked after my own miserable skin, on more occasions than I care to count, but the sheer callousness of the man raised my hackles, I don't mind admitting it. Fortunately he took my remark at face value, seeming as impervious to irony as my aide.

'“The path of duty is often a stony one”,' he quoted blithely, as though that excused everything, apparently forgetting the rest of the sentence.⁹¹ I nodded, pouring some fresh recaf into a delicate porcelain cup that held barely a mouthful, grateful for the distraction. Tempting as it was just to draw my chainsword and swipe his misbegotten head from his shoulders, giving into the impulse would be unwise in the extreme. He was an inquisitor, after all, and I would hardly have been the first man to try it. And even if I did succeed it would certainly annoy the sisters, who were bound to react with some petulance, probably involving copious amounts of incoming fire.

'How did you persuade them to let you set up there in the first place?' I asked instead. It was becoming more and more clear to me that Killian was

one of those megalomaniacs who are absolutely desperate for an audience, so consumed by the delusion of their own cleverness that they need someone else to appreciate it, and I might as well indulge him for as long as possible. The more I let him ramble, the more I'd be able to tell Amberley when I caught up with her again, and at least while we were chatting he was unlikely to make another attempt at killing me.

'I didn't have to,' he said simply. 'Hell's Edge was a Gavarronian colony, and the settlers were delighted to have friends of the convent working there.'

'I see.' I nodded thoughtfully, sipping recaf, and wishing it was in a proper sized mug. That explained the surprising amount of devotional literature left lying around the place. I wondered how many of the unfortunate colonists had regretted their choice of friends when the holy sisters had left them to the 'nids. I felt my jaw begin to tighten again at the thought, and threw out another conversational fishing line. 'I take it you've found somewhere to continue your researches?'

'Most certainly.' Metheius's voice was taking on the familiar timbre of someone fanatical about his work, and eager to discuss it. I was beginning to see why he got on so well with Killian. 'The sisters have been most accommodating.'

'I'm sure they have,' I said, trying to project an air of outward calm. If his words really meant what I thought they did, the key to the whole affair was right here, somewhere in the Convent of the White Rose. The question was, could I find my way to it? The place was vast, and the *shadowlight* could have been anywhere. Metheius nodded eagerly.

'Would you care to see for yourself?' he asked.



TWENTY-FIVE

‘By all means,’ I replied, as calmly as I could, unable to believe this sudden stroke of good fortune. Mindful of the civilised façade we were trying to maintain, I glanced at Killian, who was still stuffing his face. ‘If you have no objection, of course.’

He shook his head, smiling, which as you’ll no doubt appreciate did little to reassure me. ‘None at all,’ he declared, pushing his chair back from the table at last. ‘Quite the reverse, in fact.’ An aura of smug pomposity hung around him like Jurgen’s body odour.

I rose to my feet. As I did so, the faint rumble of the orbital bombardment rolled over us again, like the first presentiment of summer rain, and I glanced at Jurgen, exchanging a brief moment of uneasy understanding. We’d begun our long and inglorious careers together in an artillery unit, and if those years of experience were anything to go by, that barrage was a little closer than the last one had been. That, in turn, implied that a tyranid swarm large enough to attract the attention of the orbiting starships, even in spite of the sandstorms blocking their sensors, was moving in our general direction. There was no reason to believe that we were their target, though. Gavarrone was a lot higher than any of the plateaux the roving scout swarms had scaled before the main bulk of the hive fleet had arrived, so I forced my disquiet to the back of my mind and returned my attention to the immediate problem.

‘Lazurus is a fool,’ Killian said, leading the way across an immaculate lawn shaded by rustling trees, ‘and no threat to anyone, but a man of your well-known sagacity was a challenge of an entirely different order. The moment it was revealed that you were heading the search for hidden enemies, I realised that it would only be a matter of time before you found

us. After Lazurus enlisted your aid, and you knew what you were looking for, there was never even the slightest chance that the Covenant of the Blessed would simply be dismissed as another subversive group of little significance.'

'The Chaos cult,' I guessed aloud, as though I'd always been aware of the fact, and Killian nodded, leading us through a sacristy cluttered with icons, in the centre of which stood a severely chewed-up suit of power armour. Judging by the number of votive candles surrounding it this was clearly one of the order's most venerated relics, and I began to take more notice of our surroundings, realising that we were now deep in the convent's inner sanctum, further than most visitors would ever have been allowed to go.

'Indeed,' Killian agreed. 'Crude tools at best, but easily duped, and the ideal subjects for our work.' I still had no idea what he was talking about, of course, but nodded as if I did, acutely conscious that only the knowledge he seemed to believe I possessed was keeping me alive.

'That must have gone against the grain, though,' I hazarded. Killian looked up from yet another of the *fleur de lys* motifs decorating the barrel vaulted chamber, doing something to it that I couldn't see, concealed as it was behind his torso. A section of stonework swung away from the wall, revealing a brightly lit space beyond, and the inquisitor stood aside to usher us through the gap. 'I thought it was your duty to eliminate heresy wherever you found it.'

'Blunt and to the point,' Killian said, the indulgent chuckle back in his voice. 'Great virtues I'm sure in the military mind, but in the twilight wars we inquisitors must fight, things are rarely so simple.' He looked at me narrowly, his mood switching instantly to one of intense seriousness. 'You're afraid of Chaos, aren't you? In so far as you fear anything at all, of course. Your valour is far too well known to be in any doubt.' This last he delivered in a curiously placating tone, as though he might be afraid that he'd hurt my feelings.

The palms of my hands tingled as I considered the question. Far more hung on it than a simple matter of courage in the face of the enemy, of that I was certain. Somehow, I knew, the answer I gave would either convince Killian he'd been right to change his mind about killing me, or persuade him I was still a potent threat, best eliminated at the earliest opportunity. Mentally cursing the pictcasts for having given him the impression that I was a danger to his deranged plans in the first place, and trying to ignore

the growing suspicion that this was precisely why Amberley had drawn their attention to me to begin with,⁹² I tried to formulate a safe response.

‘It’s not a simple matter of courage or cowardice,’ I temporised, drawing on all the diplomatic skills I’d acquired over the years. ‘I’ve faced the forces of Chaos too often, and in too many different guises, to underestimate them. If you want to equate caution with fear, then you’re perfectly at liberty to do so, but I’ve seen too many overconfident idiots die on the battlefield to make that mistake.’ I shrugged, pretending a casual confidence I didn’t feel. ‘Emperor knows, I’ve killed enough of them myself.’

I waited, ready to go for my weapons if I had to, but Killian was nodding thoughtfully, a quiet smile on his face, as though my answer was exactly what he’d been hoping to hear.

‘I can see I was right about you,’ he said, as the stone wall slid back into place behind us, and Metheius took the lead, almost trotting down the brightly lit corridor in his eagerness to show off his toys. The stonework here was smooth, uncluttered by icons, statues, or those blasted three-leaved weeds, and Jurgen looked around us with his habitual expression of vague bafflement. (Which, had I not been controlling my features with the ease of the long-practiced dissembler, would undoubtedly have been reflected on my own face.)

‘Where are we?’ he asked, not unreasonably, and Killian gestured around us, taking in a number of closed doors, and the electrocones between them that illuminated our path more than adequately.

‘The heart of the Order of the White Rose,’ he explained, no doubt delighted to have something else to pontificate about. ‘Prepared as a hidden repository for their holiest reliquaries should an enemy ever be on the verge of taking the convent, in order to preserve them from desecration. Only the canoness and the palatine know of its existence, or have the necessary codes for access.’ He coughed modestly. ‘And the Inquisition, of course. Several representatives of the Ordo Hereticus have found these chambers useful over the millennia.’

‘I can imagine,’ I said. ‘So why bother with Hell’s Edge at all?’ Killian laughed.

‘The military mind at work again, I see. I could hardly bring members of the Covenant here for our research, could I?’ He stood aside to usher us through a doorway, no different to my eyes than any of the others, which

Metheius had entered a moment or two before. As I stepped across the threshold I was assailed by a momentary twinge of vertigo, and stumbled, until Jurgen reached out a hand to support me. The feeling subsided again, and I sub-vocalised a curse. Of all the times for my concussion to make an unexpected return, this was about the worst one possible. Killian looked at me, with unexpected solicitude. 'It takes a lot of people like that when they first get close to it,' he said sympathetically. 'The feeling will soon pass.' He laughed. 'Or if not, you may be more blessed than either of us have bargained for.'

In truth I barely heard this last remark, let alone had the leisure to try puzzling it out, as I'd just got my first good look at the room we were standing in. It was undoubtedly Metheius's domain, at least in theory, displaying all the usual appurtenances of a tech-priest's workspace: whirring and clicking cogitator banks, piles of equipment that had no discernible function that I could see, but which were clearly drawing power from somewhere, and a scattering of data-lecterns, several of which seemed to be connected to pict screens or hololiths. The usual snakepit of cabling connected it all, with the tech-priests' traditional disregard for the possibility of snagging an unwary ankle, the majority of it appearing to emanate from a metal plinth, supporting something about the size of a data-slate on which I found it difficult to focus.

An icon of the Omnissiah stood on a small polished steel shrine away to one side, making me wonder just how Eglantine would react if it ever came to her attention that one small corner of her holy of holies had been given over to the clockwork Emperor of the tech-priests. Rather badly, I suspected.

Although I'd never seen the place before, something about the layout of it sparked a vague sense of formless recognition, which didn't quite come into focus until Jurgen spoke.

'It's like the shrine we found on Perlia,' he said, and I nodded. There were differences, of course, but most of the equipment looked the same, apart from the absence of bolter holes. The other major difference was the peculiar object on the plinth, and I took a few steps towards it, picking my way carefully through the tangle of cables as I did so, hoping for a better look. Close to, it didn't seem all that impressive, just a smooth slab of stone about three times as high as it was wide, so black that the light from the electrosconces on the walls seemed to fall gently into it.

‘Careful,’ Metheius said, and I became aware that I’d got a lot closer to the thing than I’d intended. ‘There’s a field of warp energy around it.’ He glanced at his instruments, sounding puzzled for a moment. ‘That’s odd, it seems to be diminishing. No, it’s right back to its usual level.’ He thumped the lectern, and shrugged, while I noticed Jurgen taking a step backwards out of the corner of my eye as I moved cautiously away. ‘Loose connection somewhere, probably. That’s the trouble with these temporary systems.’

‘Temporary?’ I asked, and Killian nodded.

‘Periremunda’s no longer suitable for our purposes. We need a reasonably sized population, with an organised Chaos cult we can infiltrate and control, to provide us with a steady supply of experimental subjects. How else are we going to find latent psykers in sufficient quantities?’

I felt a chill running down my spine as he spoke, finally getting an inkling of what this was all about. I fought to keep an expression of dumbstruck horror from my face. If I was right, and this maniac guessed my true feelings about his monstrous design, I’d be dead in a second, or worse. Instead I nodded thoughtfully.

‘Quite. The ’nids have made quite a dent in them here.’ I nodded at Metheius, hoping that by addressing my next remark to him I’d be able to keep Killian from reading me too easily. ‘You don’t seem to be having much luck with aliens, all in all. First the orks on Perlia, and now this.’

‘Oh, quite the contrary,’ Metheius said happily. ‘It was the arrival of the orks that put us on the right track at last. The artefact was completely inert until the burst of warp energy that accompanied the arrival of their space hulk activated it.’ I nodded, remembering how the dormant necron portal on Simia Orichalcae had been triggered by a similar phenomenon. ‘Unfortunately they were rather too numerous to be easily discouraged.’

‘I’d noticed,’ I said. In spite of myself I looked at the object that just had to be the *shadowlight* again, the featureless black slab exerting a horrid fascination. ‘Did you ever find out what it was supposed to do?’

‘Its actual function?’ Metheius shook his head. ‘That still eludes us, but it’s the side effect, so to speak, that we’re most interested in, obviously.’

‘Obviously,’ I echoed, hoping that the side effect in question wasn’t the one I’d just deduced. ‘The implications of that alone are quite staggering.’

Killian nodded eagerly, an unhealthy enthusiasm burning behind his eyes again, renewing my already considerable doubts about his sanity. ‘More than just staggering,’ he said. ‘Galaxy shaking! Think about it, Cain, think

of the possibilities! If we can reliably enhance the latent psychic powers of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individuals on every world in the Imperium, what a weapon that would give us against the hordes of Chaos! We could crush them with their own weapons, cleanse the Eye of Terror itself of their foul taint! And once the Ruinous Powers lie prostrate and broken before the Golden Throne, we can sweep the xenos breeds from the stars, until the galaxy belongs to its rightful masters alone: pure, unsullied humankind!’

‘It’s a heady vision,’ I said carefully, certain that he was at least as barmy as the Chaos worshippers he was supposed to hunt down. ‘But there are rather a lot of worlds in the Imperium, and you’ve only got one of those rocks.’

‘At the moment, yes.’ The madman nodded, as though I’d just scored a reasonable debating point. ‘That’s why Metheius’s research is so vital, you see. If he can determine the precise nature and frequency of the warp energy that triggers the transformation from latent to true psyker, we can build devices of our own to do the same thing.’

‘We also have to refine the technique,’ Metheius added, a little diffidently. ‘At the moment it only works on a very small percentage of the latents exposed to it. The rest find it as fatal to the touch as an ordinary untainted human.’

‘I see.’ I nodded again. ‘Must be rather difficult to find volunteers, then.’

‘That’s why we subverted the Covenant of the Blessed,’ Methius explained. ‘They’re insane enough to take the risk, and the ones who survive, and develop useable talents, become tools of the Emperor without even realising who it is they now serve.’

‘Rather a delicious irony, don’t you think?’ Killian was getting carried away again. ‘The foot soldiers of the enemy, duped into defending the very Imperium they sought to destroy.’

‘I can see why you find it so amusing,’ I said, ‘and why you’re so keen to carry on the good work.’ I used the phrase in its colloquial sense, of course, with a fair amount of sarcasm if I’m honest, but Killian pounced on it eagerly.

‘Then you do understand!’ He glanced at Metheius. ‘What did I tell you? It was worth the risk of bringing him here!’

As you’ll no doubt appreciate, astonishment barely begins to express how I felt at that moment. Feeling as though I was inching my way along a

narrow ledge above a bottomless abyss of insanity, I nodded slowly.

‘You’re hoping I can take a message to Lazurus for you. Get him to back off.’

‘Precisely!’ Killian said. ‘For our work to succeed, we must be free of outside interference. Our shuttle will be leaving within the hour, and if you were to report back that we’d been killed, along with everyone else on the plateau, no one could possibly doubt it, not the word of a man of your reputation.’ A solid knot of ice seemed to gather itself in the pit of my stomach, and I glanced uneasily at Jurgen.

‘I’m not entirely sure I follow,’ I said, the memory of the massacre in the Valley of Daemons rising up to haunt me again. Killing everyone in a remote Mechanicus shrine was one thing, but there must have been thousands of people on Gavarrone, and hundreds of Sororitas warriors in this convent alone. Quite how Killian proposed to eliminate them all unaided was beyond me. An expression of deranged cunning flitted across his face.

‘The sisters here are loyal, there’s no doubt about that, but too many of them know of our presence. So I’ve taken certain precautions.’ Beckoning to me to follow he left the laboratory, and I complied, Jurgen at my heels as always. Metheius remained, making whatever preparations seemed necessary for their imminent departure. ‘If you refuse to help us, which I’m bound to say would hardly surprise me, I’m sorry to say that they’ll suffice to ensure your silence too.’

‘What precautions?’ I asked, a little breathlessly, as I finally caught up with him. Killian paused next to another of the doors lining the corridor.

‘This,’ he said simply, swinging it open. I reeled back, reaching for my chainsword by reflex, and Jurgen raised his lasgun, emptying the power pack over my shoulder on full auto. The tyrannid lictor inside the chamber reeled back, shrieking, and crashed to the floor, with an impact that shook dust from the crevices in the stonework. I stepped forward cautiously, keeping it covered with my laspistol as Jurgen reloaded, only then noticing that it had already been grievously wounded, and had been firmly secured to the wall by chains that looked strong enough to have held a dreadnought in check.

‘Oh, bravo.’ Killian clapped his hands, looking at Jurgen with something approaching interest for a moment, before returning his attention to me. ‘I can see why you insisted on keeping this fellow around. There’s obviously

far more to him than meets the eye.'

'What the hell's this thing doing here?' I asked, incredulous, too startled to carry on pretending we were all reasonable people. Killian looked at me blankly, as though that were obvious.

'Attracting the swarm,' he said. 'These creatures exude pheromones that—'

'I know what it is!' I practically shouted. I activated my comm-bead. 'Amberley! This lunatic's got a pet lictor stashed in the catacombs! The whole bloody swarm's on its way!'

'Traitor!' Killian screamed, almost drowning out Amberley's startled acknowledgement, drawing a plasma pistol from beneath his tabard. I already had my gun in my hand, though, and squeezed the trigger before he could bring it to bear. Instead of falling, as I'd expected, however, he suddenly vanished, with a *crack!* of imploding air.

'Frak!' I said angrily, recognising the work of a displacer field. Amberley had used one on Gravalax, and I knew the little teleportation device couldn't have taken him far. Time we got out of here, before he crawled out of whichever niche the displacer had dumped him in, and caught up with us again. Somehow I doubted that he'd still want to use me as a messenger boy.

'Ciaphas! What's happening?' Amberley asked, her voice sounding unexpectedly concerned. I filled her in as best I could while sprinting for the entrance to this bizarre hidden labyrinth, blessing the innate sense of direction that generally allowed me to remain orientated in underground environments.⁹³ 'And find Eglantine,' I concluded. 'That wretched woman's the only one apart from Killian who knows how to get down here.'

'That wretched woman is already aware of the situation,' the canoness informed me coldly, apparently having overheard the entire exchange. 'Inquisitor Vail revealed her identity to Sister Caritas the moment she was out of earshot of Killian, demanded a meeting, and has convinced me of his true nature.'

'Well that was a neat trick,' I said, wondering just how she'd managed that,⁹⁴ but I had little time to speculate. A burst of light in the corridor ahead of us dazzled my eyes, and a bolt of plasma burst against the stonework, vaporising a chunk of it about the size of my head. By the worst piece of bad luck imaginable, the displacer field had dropped Killian right between us and safety.

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TWENTY-SIX

‘Back!’ I shouted to Jorgen, aiming a fusillade of lasbolts in the general direction of the renegade inquisitor, which forced him to duck into the recess by one of the doorways.⁹⁵ With precious little cover to be had in the stark stone corridor I began to retreat towards the nearest cross passage, from which my aide was now spitting some covering fire of his own, having reached this welcome sanctuary a few seconds before. I smiled ruefully as I joined him. ‘Never thought I’d miss those hideous statues,’ I said, and Jorgen frowned in confusion.

‘Which ones were they?’ he asked.

‘Never mind,’ I told him, as another plasma bolt burst close enough for the heat of it to sear our faces. ‘Back to the laboratory. We have to get that *shadowlight* thing before Metheius manages to escape with it again.’ The thought of something like that loose in the galaxy was enough to give me the howling gibblyies, and I’d rather take on an unarmed tech-priest than a psychotic inquisitor in any case. With a bit of luck we’d be able to barricade ourselves in there just long enough for Amberley to finish him off for us, and emerge in time to take the credit for recovering the all-important artefact.

‘Might be a bit tricky, sir,’ Jorgen pointed out. ‘He’s got us pinned down nicely. If we try to pull back he’ll toast us for sure before we reached the next junction.’ A faint hint of reproach entered his voice. ‘If I had my melta I could take him out easily from here.’

‘Not while he’s still got the displacer,’ I pointed out. With those words a possible strategy suggested itself, and I steadied my aim, bracing my laspistol across my folded arm. ‘Run for it. Make a lot of noise.’

‘Sir?’ Jorgen looked even more baffled than usual, but as always he

followed my orders to the letter, sprinting down the cross corridor we'd taken refuge in. The sound of his bootsoles echoed back in the confined space, and, as I'd expected, Killian took the bait. Clearly believing we'd both fled, he appeared a moment later in the mouth of the corridor we'd hidden in, an expression of murderous malice on his face.

'Enjoy your trip,' I told him, planting a las-bolt squarely in the middle of his chest. He just had time to look surprised before he vanished again, with another muted thunderclap of imploding air. There was no telling how far he might have gone this time, of course, so I hurried after Jurgen as quickly as I could, catching up with him just as he reached the laboratory.

'That was quick...' Metheius began, before glancing in our direction and apparently beginning to realise that something had gone seriously wrong. 'What's happening? Where's the inquisitor?'

'Emperor alone knows,' I said, aiming my laspistol squarely at his head. He was probably mostly augmetic there, of course, so it might not do all that much damage if I fired at him, but a shot or two would certainly spoil his day. 'Step away from the *shadowlight* and keep your hands where I can see them. The mechadendrites too.'

'I'll get the stone thing,' Jurgen said, slinging his lasgun and reaching out to grab it with a grubby hand.

Metheius watched with an air of smug vindictiveness as his nail-bitten fingers closed around it, which rapidly changed to one of surprise and alarm.

'You've deactivated it!' His head swung round to examine his instruments, his voice quivering with shock. 'That shouldn't be possible!' He turned back towards me. 'What have you done?'

'Perhaps Lazurus isn't quite the fool you take him for,' I said, reaching into the pocket of my greatcoat and allowing the bulge of the perfectly innocuous data-slate I was carrying there to become visible for a moment. Clearly believing that I'd come equipped with some piece of techno-sorcery provided by his former associate (which of course was precisely what I'd intended, as Jurgen's peculiar abilities were something neither of us wanted to draw any further attention to), the renegade tech-priest edged towards me, his curiosity evidently stronger than his fear of getting shot.

'He's found some way of dampening the warp field?' Methius's voice was both avid and incredulous. 'You must let me see. This could open up a whole new line of enquiry.'

‘Which we’ll discuss as soon we’re aboard the starship, and on our way out of the system,’ Killian cut in, appearing at the door, his plasma weapon levelled. He glared at me, the stubby barrel pointed right at the centre of my chest. ‘Bring it out slowly, and hand it to Metheius. You can hardly expect me to miss at this range.’

‘Probably not,’ I said, projecting as much calm assurance as I could, which I’m sure you’ll appreciate wasn’t all that easy under the circumstances. Luckily Killian had apparently bought into my fictitious reputation in a big way, which meant that his own expectation of being unable to intimidate me would help to maintain the façade. ‘But those things make rather a mess. You’ll probably vaporise the nullifier along with my torso.’ I shrugged, keeping my laspistol pointed at the centre of Metheius’s forehead, with all the steadiness my augmetic fingers could impart. ‘And you must have killed enough people by now to know my finger will tighten on the trigger by reflex before I fall. If you shoot me, you’ll be killing Methius too.’ I risked a quick glance at Jurgen, but he still had the *shadowlight* in his right hand, and couldn’t reach for his lasgun.

Killian nodded thoughtfully, as though accepting the inevitable. ‘I can always get another tech-priest,’ he said slowly, ‘but there’s only one psychic enhancer.’ His finger began to tighten on the trigger, and I’ve faced enough madmen in my time to know he wasn’t bluffing. An instant before he could fire, I lowered my arm.

‘All right,’ I said, holstering my weapon. He could still have shot me, of course, out of sheer vindictiveness, but if I’d read my man right he wouldn’t, not for a minute or two anyway. His kind always likes to gloat first, especially if they think they’ve beaten you. I pulled the data-slate out of my pocket, and held it out towards him. ‘You win. Here, take it.’

‘I’m not that big a fool,’ Killian told me. ‘Hand it to Metheius. I’m sure you have some idea of jumping me the moment I lower the gun.’ Well of course I’ve got far more sense than to start wrestling a lunatic for something that can quite easily barbeque us both if it goes off, but it never hurts to keep an enemy off balance, so I simply shrugged.

‘Can’t blame a man for trying,’ I said. I handed the slate, in its anonymous military field casing, to the tech-priest, who started fumbling with the catch, no doubt eager to see what the miraculous device his rival had apparently created looked like. ‘You just press it to open the case,’ I added helpfully.

Metheius froze, looking at the dull green box in his hand as if it had

suddenly started ticking. 'Of course, it'll be booby-trapped,' he said, glaring at me as if I'd almost succeeded in tricking him, which was exactly what I'd been hoping for, of course. If he'd realised what the box actually contained, things would have got very unpleasant. 'Genetically coded to you, I suppose?'

'You're the expert,' I told him, letting his paranoia do the work for me, and trying not to let my relief at the sight of him stowing the thing in the recesses of his robe without any further attempt to examine it show on my face. 'Now I suppose you expect us to just hand the *shadowlight* over?' I asked Killian.

The deranged inquisitor shook his head. 'No, I expect to kill you both and take it from your corpses,' he replied, clearly relishing the prospect.

Wondering just how much longer Amberley was going to be, I shook my head pityingly. 'Well, if you're sure it can take a plasma discharge at point blank range, go right ahead,' I replied casually, keeping my hand as close as I dared to the butt of my laspistol. 'Of course, if you shoot Jurgen first, I'll have the chance to see if the nullifier works on your displacement field too. You must be standing well within its radius of effect.' I glanced at my aide. 'On the other hand, if you shoot me first, he'll have time to drop the rock and open up with his lasgun.' One of the chief advantages of a completely unmerited reputation for unwavering integrity, I've often found, is that the more outrageous the lie, the more likely it is to be believed, and Killian, don't forget, was away with the cherubs to begin with. An element of doubt began to creep into his belligerent expression.

'You.' He switched his gaze to Jurgen, but kept the plasma pistol pointing unwaveringly at my chest. 'Hand the artefact to Metheius, and place your gun on the floor, slowly. If I see even a hint of treachery, I'll vaporise the commissar.' Jurgen, as always, glanced at me for confirmation, and I nodded.

'Do as he says,' I said levelly. 'We can always recover it later.'

Killian laughed. 'There won't be a later,' he reminded me. 'The tyranids are going to pick this plateau clean, and you along with it.' That had hardly escaped my notice, of course, but as usual in that sort of situation I'd found it best to concentrate on the immediate problem, on the entirely reasonable grounds that if I didn't I'd be comfortably dead by the time the next one rolled along.

'Then you'd better get moving,' I suggested, as Metheius reached out a

tentative mehadendrite to take the *shadowlight* from Jurgen. As the mysterious artefact left his fingers my aide unslung his lasgun with a truculent expression, clearly sorely tempted to use it, but, as always, he followed my orders to the letter, allowing the weapon to fall to the floor. Metheius scooped it up with his other mechanical tentacle, and trotted over to join Killian, looking absurdly pleased with himself. 'In my experience the 'nids aren't all that likely to stick to someone else's timetable.'

'Drop your weapons too,' Killian ordered, returning his attention to me. I unbuckled my weapon belt, feeling oddly disconcerted as the familiar weight fell away, and stepped out of the loop of leather as my pistol and chainsword clattered to the flagstones at my feet. Metheius hesitated for a moment, then, as I'd hardly dared to hope, handed the *shadowlight* to Killian in order to pluck my weapons from the floor without approaching me too closely.

'Thank you.' The deranged inquisitor tucked the small slab of stone under his free arm, and took a step towards the doorway. 'I don't suppose we'll be meeting again.'

'I sincerely hope not,' I told him, hearing the clatter of bootsoles in the corridor outside at last. Before Killian even realised reinforcements had arrived Amberley was inside the room, her entourage at her heels, nodding a casual greeting to me while Pelton, Simeon and Zemelda aimed their lasguns at him. Jurgen strode forwards at once with a furious expression, to pluck his lasgun and my weapon belt from the mehadendrites of the stunned-looking tech-priest.

'Ernst Stavros Killian,' Amberley said loudly and clearly, holding up her hand to display the Inquisitorial electoo that flashed into visibility as she spoke. 'You have been declared *Excommunicate Diabolus* by the Consilium Ravus of the triune ordos, and by their authority are ordered to surrender your person to answer to the charges of treason and heresy there laid against you.' She pulled a roll of parchment that would have choked a grox from inside her greatcoat, and brandished it in his general direction.

'Just what I might have expected from a pusillanimous puritan,' Killian sneered. 'Precisely the sort of tunnel-visioned weakling the Consilium would choose to send after me.'

'A tunnel-visioned weakling with rather more guns than you've got,' Amberley pointed out cheerfully, as I buckled my weapon belt and drew my laspistol to emphasise the point. Looking uncommonly pleased with himself

Jurgen joined the ring of lasguns pointing at the cornered inquisitor, apparently unaware of the way Zemelda and Pelton widened the cordon a little as he stepped up to reinforce it. 'And my Inquisitorial mandate does allow me the discretionary power of summary execution if you refuse to co-operate.'

'Then you leave me with no other option,' Killian said resignedly, lowering his plasma pistol at last. I barely had time for a sigh of relief before he pulled the trigger, blowing a hole through the floor at his feet, and sending us all reeling with the bright flash of combustion.

'Down there!' Amberley shouted, as I blinked my eyes clear of the dancing after-images. Without hesitation she leapt through the hole after Killian, Pelton and Simeon following almost at once.

I held out a hand to forestall Zemelda as she teetered on the brink. 'Wait,' I said. I pointed to Metheius, who was still staggering, disorientated and noticeably singed from his proximity to the detonation, but who would undoubtedly recover soon enough thanks to his augmetic components. 'Detain him if you can, shoot him if you can't. Jurgen, with me.'

Reasoning from the lack of any gunfire that Amberley and her friends hadn't run into anything inimical in the chamber below, which appeared to be identical in size and shape to this one from what I could see of it, though completely empty, I leapt through the hole, which proved to be a trapdoor of noticeably thinner stone than that forming the rest of the floor. I landed with a jolt that I absorbed instinctively, reflexes honed on the assault courses of the schola progenium having been augmented by years of experience on the battlefield, rolling clear just in time to avoid Jurgen landing on top of me. He glanced around, levelling his lasgun, peering into the shadowed gloom that surrounded us. It seemed Killian hadn't bothered kindling the luminators down here, presumably because he didn't think he'd need to, but I trusted my old hiver's instincts in a place like this, and listened carefully, disentangling the sound of running feet from the echoes overlapping them with little difficulty.

'Which way, sir?' Jurgen asked, just as the distant patter of footsteps was drowned out by an agonised scream that seemed to go on forever, before finally trailing away into reverberating silence.

I pointed towards the source. 'That way, at a guess,' I said, leading the way at a rapid trot. As I'd surmised, the layout of the corridors here was identical to that of the floor above, and my knack of orientation in an

environment like this didn't let me down. Within moments we'd caught up with Amberley and the others, who were staring at what was left of Killian in the light of the portable luminators they'd evidently had tucked away somewhere in their Guard-issue equipment pouches.

'What happened?' Pelton asked, his face almost as pale as a genuine Valhallan's. 'He was running ahead of us, and then he just stopped. It was like his whole body was twisting.' He broke off, unable or unwilling to continue, but he really had no need to. Killian's corpse was as deformed as the vilest of mutants, bone and muscle apparently having flowed like melting candle wax, until his soul had been wrenched from his body.

'It was the *shadowlight*,' I said, addressing Amberley directly, my words tumbling over one another in my desperate haste to convey the danger the thing represented. 'It's marinated in warp energy. They thought we'd deactivated it somehow because they saw us carrying it, but as soon as Killian got out of range of whatever Jurgen does to psychic phenomena, he became exposed to the full power of the thing.'

'I see.' Amberley nodded, understanding at once. 'We'll need proper shielding to carry it safely.'

'Metheius was getting ready to pack it up for transit,' I said. 'There must be something in the laboratory that'll do the job.'

'Then we'd better get back there,' Amberley said. She gestured towards the sinister black stone. 'Jurgen, if you wouldn't mind carrying it for me?'

'Of course not, miss.' My aide smiled broadly, and trotted off to retrieve the cursed artefact. I was just beginning to heave a heartfelt sigh of relief, when Eglantine's voice crackled in my comm-bead.

'Inquisitor Vail,' she said. 'The tyranids are attacking.'



TWENTY-SEVEN

The canoness was waiting for us in the chamber we'd entered the labyrinth by, standing next to the mangled power armour on its display pedestal, surrounded by a bodyguard of Celestians. The Sister Superior in charge of them looked vaguely familiar, but it was only when she spoke to me that I recognised her as the leader of the little troop that had got hacked to pieces on Aceralbattera, and whose gung-ho imbecility had almost cost us the plateau. I returned her greeting cordially enough, however, as for some reason she seemed pleased to see me, and from what I could gather of the tactical situation through my comm-bead I'd need every well-disposed person in power armour I could find between me and the 'nids if I was going to get out of here in one piece.

'I owe you a great debt, commissar,' she told me, looking oddly embarrassed. 'You recalled me to my duty, when I was so carried away by vainglorious zeal I would have neglected it.'

'Well, that's my job,' I said modestly, but the woman just nodded seriously, taking the words at face value.

'The Emperor sent you, of that I've no doubt. To have left his temple undefended while it was beset with xeno-spawned filth...' She sighed. 'It would have been a grave thing indeed to have had to confess before the Golden Throne.'

'Well, let's hope you don't have to check in there for a long time to come,' I said.

Eglantine, who until now had been pointedly ignoring me, glanced up from a huddled conversation with Amberley, her expression grave. 'None of us expect to survive this battle,' she said, as calmly as if she'd simply been commenting on the weather. 'Nor do we deserve to. Our order has

been the instrument of the vilest blasphemy. All we can do is seek to atone for that sin, and pray to the Emperor that our deeds will prove worthy of his forgiveness.'

'Killian lied to a lot of people,' I told her, wondering for a moment if the late and unlamented inquisitor's insanity had been somehow contagious. 'You followed his orders in good faith.'

'That merely compounds our guilt,' Eglantine said heavily. 'We were so sure of our path, and so proud of doing His will, that we never thought to pray for the divine guidance that would have opened our eyes and hearts to the truth. Our arrogance was the seed of our own destruction.' All of which sounded like the kind of sermon that was guaranteed to bore me into a stupor whenever we were herded into the chapel at the schola, and which has kept me out of temples ever since, except for those occasions on which protocol and my position within the Commissariat have combined to make my presence at some service or other unavoidable.

There was clearly no reasoning with her, so I wasn't going to waste any more breath trying. Instead I simply nodded. 'The Emperor protects,' I said, falling back on the familiar infantryman's platitude, and the canoness nodded too, apparently taking heart from the well-worn formula.

'He'll need to,' Amberley interjected grimly.

Recalled to the matter at hand, Eglantine nodded. 'The swarm is already overrunning the outer walls,' she said. 'Sister Bonica and her Celestians will escort you back to your shuttle. After that, all our fates are in the hands of Him on Earth.' She glanced at the plain black carrying case hanging from Jurgen's left hand, his right hefting his lasgun, which he'd slung from his shoulder so that he could shoot it from the hip with some semblance of accuracy. 'Is that the abomination that so profaned our citadel?'

'It is,' Amberley confirmed.

Eglantine sighed. 'It seems a very small thing to have done so much harm.'

'Killian did the harm,' I said, unable to resist glaring at Metheius, who was tagging along as good as gold, assisted by the occasional prod from the barrel of Zemelda's lasgun. 'With a little help. The important thing now is to undo it.'

'Quite.' The canoness returned her attention to Amberley. 'As soon as you're airborne we'll regroup, and try to keep the swarm away from the town. We'll delay it as long as we can.'

‘Emperor willing, that should be enough,’ Amberley said.

‘I pray so.’ Eglantine began to lead the way back through the wide corridors we’d traversed no more than an hour or so before, exchanging brisk messages with her subordinates, who were apparently fighting on several fronts. I listened in on my comm-bead as best I could, but little of what I heard made sense to me. I was unfamiliar with the layout of the convent, and the sisters used their own protocols and battle language. I was able to gather enough to infer that things weren’t going at all well, though.

After a while we deviated from the route I remembered, bypassing Killian’s guest quarters, and I began to see the first signs of damage: flamer burns on the frescoes, bolter holes in the statues and hangings, and the occasional body, left where it had fallen as the tide of battle ebbed and flowed. The deep gashes left in the ceramite of the first shredded sister we chanced upon looked uncomfortably familiar to me, and I wasn’t surprised to find the remains of several genestealers piled up at the next junction. It seemed the hive mind was sticking to its traditional tactics, infiltrating scout organisms ahead of the bulk of the swarm to disrupt the defences it faced, and I gripped my laspistol and chainsword a little tighter as we jogged along, surrounded by the comforting bulk of silver and black power armour.

‘That way,’ Eglantine said at last, pointing down a cross corridor we’d just come to. She turned and faced the Celestian sister, making the sign of the aquila. ‘Emperor be with you, Bonica.’

‘And with you,’ Bonica responded, ‘until we meet again before the Golden Throne.’ My last sight of Eglantine was a blur of motion, sprinting with all the speed her armour-enhanced muscles were capable of towards the distant tumult of battle, and the briefly glimpsed mayhem in the courtyard beyond her hurrying form. The wide corridor we stood in led to what, a short while before, had been an elegant formal garden, its wide lawns and flowering borders crushed to mud beneath a heaving sea of chitin, mandible, and doggedly resisting Sororitas, falling back slowly as that irresistible tidal wave of malign bio-forms broke against the shore of their bolter fire and expertly wielded sarissae.⁹⁶

‘Pontius,’ Amberley voxed. ‘We’re going to need pickup fast.’

‘I’m on it, ma’am,’ our pilot’s voice reassured us, calm as always, and I began to feel a faint flare of hope. ‘There’s a courtyard about six hundred metres from your present position the ’nids haven’t reached yet. Big mosaic of one of the saints on the wall.’

‘I know it,’ Bonica assured him, and we began double-timing it away from the battle behind us, although several of the sisters looked distinctly disappointed not to be following their canonesse into the jaws of death (quite literally in this case, probably).

‘Good.’ Amberley voxed our pilot again. ‘Keep scanning for us, in case we have to deviate.’ She hurdled another fallen battle-sister, who seemed to be missing most of her head. ‘There are signs of infiltration in the building already.’

‘I’ve got you on auspex,’ Pontius assured her, which sounded good to me.

We were passing through another atrium when the ‘stealers jumped us, a whole pack of them flowing silently out of the shadows where statues stood in niches and ornately gilded doorways led off to silent chapels. That alone would have been intimidating enough, but towering over them all was the baleful silhouette of a brood lord, its scything talons and rending claws extended as it bounded forward at the head of its grotesquely twisted progeny.

‘Run,’ Bonica snapped, as the sisters opened up with their bolters, scything down the front rank as they closed. I didn’t need urging twice, breaking into a sprint for the only clear exit I could see, Jurgen at my heels. ‘We’ll hold them here.’

Not for long, I thought, there were too many of them, and Amberley evidently shared my opinion, running just as hard as I was for the open door and the rectangle of blue sky beyond. Zemelda hesitated, cracking off a shot at the onrushing horde, and Pelton dropped back to seize her arm, dragging her into motion again. While her attention was momentarily distracted Metheius made a break for it, sprinting away at quite an astonishing turn of speed. I assume he must have had augmetic legs, as he even managed to overtake me, which is something not easily done when I’m fleeing for my life.

‘*In nomine Imperiator!*’ Bonica yelled, brandishing her chainsword and leaping forward to meet the patriarch head-on. To my astonishment she sent it reeling back wounded before the thing rallied and knocked her sideways with a vicious swipe that laid her armour open. Before it could finish her off another of the sisters hosed it down with a flamer, which cut a swathe through its smaller brethren and made it flinch away from its intended victim.

I never got to see the rest of the one-sided encounter, because at last I was

through the doorway, into the courtyard with the mosaic that Pontius had spotted from the air, and Emperor be praised, there was our Aquila. It hovered gently a few metres above the ground, and began to settle, the screaming of its engines drowning out the shrieks of the Celestians dying messily behind us. So intent was I on the prospect of rescue held out by the slowly descending ramp that I never even noticed the new threat facing us, until a gargoyle swooped down from nowhere to pluck Metheius from the ground.

The tech-priest rose slowly, twisting desperately in the thing's grasp, until it ripped his head from his shoulders, spattering the flagstones beneath them both with blood and lubricant. Leaving the body to fall across a delicately filigreed bench plastered with enough wrought iron *fleur de lys* to be hideously uncomfortable for anyone unfortunate enough to sit on it, the winged obscenity wheeled around in search of fresh prey, and to my horror I was able to discern a whole flock of the vile things gliding in over the wall towards us.

Had they been carrying fleshborers, I've no doubt that it would all have been over in seconds, but these, it seemed, had been bred for close combat, relying on talon and jaw to dispatch their enemies. I took out the one that had done for Methius with a single shot from my laspistol, and Amberley opened up with her lasgun, potting another as it swooped down towards us shrieking like a daemon.

'Pelton! Get Jurgen aboard!' she ordered, the full authority of her Inquisitorial rank in the tone of her voice. 'We'll cover you.' My aide turned towards me nevertheless, and I nodded confirmation.

'We'll be right behind you,' I assured him, with as much conviction as I could muster. Arguing with Amberley was pointless at the best of times, and under the circumstances would be downright suicidal. I just had to trust that she knew what she was doing, and that once the artefact was safe we'd be able to follow it. Guns blazing, Jurgen, Pelton and Zemelda forged their way towards the ramp, bringing down at least a dozen of the airborne horrors as they did so, while Amberley, Simeon and I must have accounted for a score or more of the remainder between us.⁹⁷

The former commissar was darting rapidly back and forth, tracking targets and dispatching them with the speed and efficiency of a Hydra battery, and I hardly needed to glimpse the distended veins in his face and hands to realise he was benefiting from a massive dose of 'slaught. Reflexes and aggression

boosted far beyond what the human frame was normally capable of, he resembled nothing so much as a Khornate berserker, an impression enhanced as the power pack of his lasgun finally ran dry.

Rather than snapping a fresh one into place, as any trained soldier ought to have done, he simply gave a howl of frustrated rage and began using the weapon as a club, battering one of the gargoyles to the ground as it swooped towards his head, its talons extended. Inevitably, so intent was he on reducing the creature to bloody mush, he completely forgot the presence of all the others. Apparently maddened by the grisly fate of their compatriot⁹⁸ the others mobbed him, tearing him into scraps of flesh and bone in a single whirling cloud of slashing death.

‘Come on!’ Whatever she may have felt about the gruesome death of her henchman Amberley was certainly pragmatic enough to take advantage of the distraction it afforded. While the flock’s attention was diverted we sprinted for the boarding ramp, not even bothering to shoot anything on the way.

‘Genestealers, closing fast,’ Pelton called, and he and Jurgen began firing their lasguns from the top of the ramp, my aide having finally divested himself of the *shadowlight* in its anonymous carrying case. (In theory, I suppose, any of us could have taken the thing now that it was properly insulated, but no one seemed particularly keen to try.) After a moment Zemelda joined in too, her face grimmer than I’d ever seen it. I suspected her game of inquisitors and heretics had finally stopped being fun.

I risked a glance behind us, and wished I hadn’t. The ’stealer swarm was boiling out of the building we’d left mere moments before, having apparently run out of Sororitas to kill, and was closing fast, although the brood lord at least seemed to have been taken out of the fight. On the downside, though, there wasn’t enough left of Simeon to keep the surviving gargoyles interested, and they were beginning to take to the air again, rising with great slow beats of their leathery wings. Galvanised by a fresh shot of adrenaline I picked up my pace towards the belly of the Aquila, and the safe haven it offered, trying to shake off the chill certainty that I wasn’t going to make it.

‘No problem,’ Pontius said casually, opening up with the nose-mounted lascannons at last, and the onrushing horde of ’stealers scattered in confusion, ragged holes blasted through their ranks, those behind stumbling over the smouldering corpses of their less fortunate brood mates. One of the

gargoyles was clipped by the barrage of heavy weapons fire too and fell heavily, its left wing shredded, to thrash around in the viscid puddle of Simeon's mortal remains, although the others were sufficiently agile to avoid the deadly beams.

Fleeting as the respite had been, it was enough. My boot soles rang on the steel plating of the ramp at last, and the Aquila began rising from the ground, while everyone except Amberley wasted lasbolts in a final gesture of farewell. She was talking urgently to someone on her comm-bead, and after a moment of retuning I was able to catch the final fragments of conversation.

'Standing by,' an unfamiliar voice said, and then hesitated. 'Can you confirm those co-ordinates?'

'Confirmed,' Amberley snapped, in the tone that intimidated Planetary Governors, and returned her attention to the battlefield below.

Looking down through the gap around the rapidly closing ramp, I felt the breath catch in my throat. The entire convent was overrun by a scuttling tide of chitin, walls and buildings coated by a moving slick of bioengineered killing machines, and there seemed no end to them. Most terrifying of all, as we banked away I could see that the vast bulk of the swarm was still making its way up the side of the plateau, a heaving mass of armour, claw and talon, which stretched down into the depths farther than the eye could see.

'The sisters will never be able to hold them,' I said grimly, and Amberley shook her head.

'No, they won't,' she agreed, as the closing ramp thudded into place, cutting us off from the grisly sight. Her expression grave, she led the way back to the passenger compartment. I followed, my eyes drawn irresistibly to the panorama of destruction beyond the viewports, but my nose soon informed me that I'd been joined by Jurgen, who placed the case containing the *shadowlight* on the table.

To my surprise, it seemed, a few of the Sororitas still survived, small pockets of resistance within the convent flaring briefly before being overrun and swamped, while a pitiful handful were attempting to follow Eglantine's battle plan, forming up alongside the Rhinos that had borne them to temporary safety in a last-ditch attempt to stem the tide. My eyes were drawn briefly to a convoy of fast-moving dots approaching from the direction of the town, which proved, as our widening spiral took us over

them, to be a dozen trucks packed with PDF troopers from the garrison we'd intended to visit that morning, apparently as intent as ever on following the sisters' lead. They'd be far too late to reinforce them, though, of that I had no doubt.

I was right. As we passed over the remains of the convent for the last time the few remaining battle-sisters were finally overwhelmed, falling to the jaws and talons of the tyranids, holding the last scraps of ground they could to the very end. No doubt the PDF, and Emperor alone knew how many other innocent bystanders, were about to share their fate.

'On my mark,' Amberley said calmly, and the voice she'd been speaking to before crackled confidently in my comm-bead.

'Still standing by, inquisitor. You appear to be clear.'

Amberley shrugged. 'Then fire,' she said simply. I tensed, wondering what new danger she'd perceived, and waited for Pontius to trigger the lascannons again, but for several seconds nothing seemed to happen.

Suddenly, without warning, ravening shafts of energy blasted down from the sky above our heads, slamming into the ground just ahead of the tyranid advance. A plume of vaporised rock and chitin rose into the air, and our sturdy little shuttle shuddered as the shockwaves from the disrupted atmosphere battered against it. Jurgen swallowed hard.

'They've missed!' I said, in stunned disappointment, and indeed for a moment or two it seemed that the lance batteries of the starships in orbit had done just that, merely clipping the leading edge of the swarm instead of blasting straight into its centre as I would have expected. Amberley grinned at me.

'You think so?' she asked, an edge of amusement in her voice. A second later the rest of the flotilla's firepower opened up too, dazzling my eyes as their heavy beams struck the site of the convent, evaporating buildings, and scouring the entire location down to the bedrock beneath. The remainder of the swarm began to mill around uncertainly, the directing intelligence severely disrupted by the holes being punched in it.

'Briskly prepped!' Zemelda said in awestruck tones, which I took to indicate approval. Amberley nodded as a complete slice of the plateau sheared away and began to fall into the depths, disintegrating as it went, so that after a moment it was hard to tell which spinning fragments were boulder, and which were wildly flailing tyranids. A moment later the barrage ended, and I just caught a final glimpse of the PDF trucks slithering

to a baffled halt on the new and still molten rim before Pontius turned us towards Principia Mons and they disappeared from sight beyond the frame of the viewport.

‘Quite satisfactory,’ Amberley agreed. ‘We’ve got the *shadowlight* back, Killian’s dead, and so is anyone else who knew about it.’ She grinned happily at me. ‘Apart from us, of course.’

‘Of course,’ I said, wishing the idea didn’t leave me feeling quite so uncomfortable. Amberley smiled again, and handed me a goblet of amasec, which I downed rather more rapidly than such a fine example of the distiller’s art deserved.

‘It would have been nice if we’d had the chance to interrogate Metheius properly, but at least we got copies of his research data,’ she added. She looked speculatively at the ominous black case, lying in the centre of the table between us. ‘Now we’ve found a few more artefacts on Perlia, perhaps we’ll get a better idea of what this thing’s supposed to do.’

‘Perhaps you will,’ I agreed, thinking with some relief that I’d never set eyes on the infernal thing again. (Something I was completely wrong about, of course, but at the time I was still blissfully ignorant of the galaxy-shaking events lurking in wait for us all at the turn of the millennium.)

Amberley nodded thoughtfully. ‘So what are you going to do now?’ she asked.

I shrugged. ‘Go back to the regiment, I suppose. We’ll be here for a while mopping up, and wherever there are troopers there’s bound to be work for a commissar.’ A fresh thought suddenly occurred to me, and I sighed with irritation. ‘Jurgen,’ I added, ‘make a note to contact the PDF on Gavarrone, and reschedule our visit of inspection.’

There was no real point to the errand now, of course, as I already knew I didn’t have to worry about any further assassination attempts, and their willingness to engage the tyranids alongside the battle-sisters had resolved any lingering doubts about hybrid infiltration, but cancelling it without an obvious reason would only lead to questions, something I was sure Amberley would be less than pleased about. I contemplated the mountain of paperwork that would ensue from this unexpected delay, and sighed again. A familiar odour manifested at my shoulder.

‘Very good, sir,’ Jurgen said, holding out the decanter. ‘Would you care for another drink?’

I smiled lazily. ‘You just read my mind,’ I told him.

‘I hope not,’ Amberley said, with an uneasy glance at the *shadowlight*.

[Which isn’t quite true, as anyone less likely than Jorgen to develop psychic abilities probably doesn’t exist, and I was well aware of the fact at the time. Nevertheless, on that note of somewhat strained levity, this extract from the Cain Archive comes to a natural conclusion.]

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FOOTNOTES

1. *Cain and the 597th had stumbled across a necron tomb on the ice world they'd been sent to defend from an orkish incursion. It's a testament to Cain's considerable resourcefulness that so many of them survived the experience.*

2. *A common characteristic of iceworlders, who, in the nature of things, tend not to get out much, at least if they can avoid it.*

3. *Or occasionally in person.*

4. *Like many provincial worlds, Periremunda had only one resident representative of the Adeptus Arbites, charged with overseeing the work of the local law enforcement agencies.*

5. *The planetary capital. Technically the somewhat unimaginative name referred to the plateau on which the city was built, but since the equally dully named Principia Urbi had sprawled out to encompass most of it, the two had become virtually synonymous. If Cain was ever aware of the distinction, he makes no mention of the fact.*

6. *Kilometres; a common Valhallan colloquialism that Cain had picked up, among others, from his prolonged association with the natives of that world.*

7. *So much so that the prohibition was flouted several times by local civilians, until a 'warning shot' downed an aircar full of city aldermen returning from a banquet at the halls of the Fabricator's Guild, fortunately without doing serious injury to anyone of consequence. After that, it seems to have been followed to the letter.*

8. Which implies that, despite his assertion to the contrary, he probably at least skimmed through the briefing materials on the voyage out from Coronus.

9. The gardens of the governor's palace: unusually, these were divided into an inner garden, to which access was strictly limited to members of his household, and an outer park, open to the citizens of the city on festivals and holidays.

10. Cain alludes in many places throughout the archive to having been native to a hiveworld, but precisely which one remains obscure.

11. Jurgan had been serving with the 12th Field Artillery when Cain first acquired his services, so his military rank was that of gunner rather than the private or trooper more common among the line regiments of the Imperial Guard.

12. The local name for law enforcers. As has been noted elsewhere the accepted nomenclature for such officials varies widely from world to world, and like many seasoned travellers Cain often refers to them simply as Arbites, despite the fact that they're merely subordinate to the Adeptus rather than true members of it. In this case, however, as he usually does when he has contact with actual Adeptus Arbites functionaries, he is precise about the distinction.

13. The regular call sign for the arbitrator's personal vehicle on Periremunda. Somewhat theatrical, but under most circumstances it was a pretty dull little world, so I suppose the justicars couldn't be blamed for trying to make a routine chauffeuring job sound a little more interesting.

14. A space hulk Cain boarded with the Reclaimers Astartes Chapter, while serving as the Imperial Guard liaison officer to them during the Viridia campaign.

15. The armourer of the Reclaimers, who seem to have considered Cain as close to a friend as was possible for anyone outside his Chapter.

16. So he says. I recall a distinct resemblance to a stuffed fish for quite some time.

17. Actually, I only ate two, and they weren't that large to begin with.

And I'd expended a lot of energy; cleansing a genestealer nest can really take it out of you.

18. A mildly disparaging nickname for techpriests and engineers common among the Imperial Guard.

19. Cain's not exaggerating here. Jorgen was a blank, one of those incredibly rare individuals with the innate ability to nullify any psychic or sorcerous influence in the vicinity. It was Rakel's reaction to their initial meeting on Gravalax that first brought his gift to my attention.

20. Not as such, but as most of my fellow inquisitors will undoubtedly agree, the nature of our work tends to bring us into contact with a higher than average proportion of people whose view of the galaxy is somewhat unconventional.

21. Which Cain presumably overheard on his comm-bead.

22. The planetary capital of Gravalax.

23. One of the orders minoris, which split away from the Order of the Sacred Rose in the latter part of M39.

24. Although in my experience gratitude for our efforts isn't exactly common.

25. At which point a lesser woman might be tempted to say 'I told you so.'

26. Cain had presumably heard the story from the survivors, as these events took place before he joined the regiment. Anyone wanting a fuller account of them is referred to chapter eighty-seven of Arten Burrar's The Abominable Chitin, cited earlier.

27. Third Company was the regiment's logistical support arm, made up mostly of transport, medicae, sapper, and other specialised units. Though just as capable of fighting as any other troopers at a pinch, they would only be deployed in the front line in the direst of emergencies.

28 The version most widely used by the chaplains of the Imperial Guard is the abbreviated twenty-two verse one, as services in the field tend, of necessity, to be as brief as possible.

29. As opposed to Darien High, the orbital part of the starport facilities.

30. The gas bag keeping the dirigible aloft would have been subdivided into several compartments, so that it would remain in the air in the unlikely event of one or more being accidentally torn.

31. A newsgleaner hanging around on the pavement outside.

32. Extremely unlikely, knowing Kasteen, although anything she did have to say in response to such a question would certainly have been unsuitable for publication.

33. In this instance it hadn't proved necessary.

34. Like many regiments with extensive experience of urban warfare, the 597th routinely divided its squads into two fireteams of five troopers each.

35. The fringe of cometary debris marking the nominal boundary of a solar system.

36. A hymn invoking the Emperor's protection in times of peril; somewhat mawkish to modern tastes, but still popular among the pious of a traditional disposition.

37. Quite probably; the human brain operates on minute electrical impulses, so it's perfectly possible that his masking field would also affect anything electronic in the vicinity.

38. He didn't.

39. In actual fact, given his popularity among the Imperial Guard contingent, Cain's assassination would have had a noticeably adverse effect on morale, something which, typically, seems not to have occurred to him.

40. Which is why we have the Ordos Hereticus and Malleus. Although it must be said that some of the more Radical members of both are barely distinguishable from their prey, even in their degree of apparent sanity.

41. A D'Lorien Raptor, fabricated on Rubica, if anyone cares. Extensively modified by Yanbel, of course; the standard model comes

without communications gear, weapons, or armour plate.

42. Cain's exaggerating here. There were at least three centimetres to spare all around.

43. Or, more likely, a hangover of monumental proportions.

44. Well, if you have to play the spoiled little rich girl, you might as well embrace the role. Nothing convinces people you've more money than sense quite as effectively as indulging a ludicrously expensive whim.

45. That, of course, is entirely a matter of opinion. Some inquisitors believe the Emperor's work is best done by charging around the place like a grox in a ceramic emporium, leaving a trail of carnage and destruction in their wake, while others prefer not to let the enemies of all that's good and holy get away clean by making it blindingly obvious that they're coming for them.

46. No, I don't know either.

47. An Imperial Guard slang term for raw recruits. It's apparently a phonetic rendering of FNGs, which I'm told stands for Frakking New Guys.

48. In fact it was from my personal yacht, the Externus Exterminatus, which was waiting in orbit as usual, broadcasting the ident code of an ore barge from Desolatia.

49. In fact they probably recognised Cain, who was a familiar figure across the entire planet, especially in Hoarfell, where his actions in the fuel tanker incident had made him an even greater hero to the local populace.

50. Taking off quickly from a dangerous landing zone. Sometimes I think Imperial Guard should be classified as a distinct dialect of Gothic all by itself.

51. Dark greys, blues, and black, intended to let the wearer blend into the shadows of the underhive.

52. Which works too, of course, especially when you need something with enough firepower to put a dent in a planet, but it's nice to have somewhere cosier to call home.

53. Which, as anyone who's ever worn one of the things can readily attest, is actually tainted with the lingering bouquet of Emperor knows how many centuries of old sweat and flatulence. That said, it's still a major improvement over a great many external environments, including Hell's Edge.

54. The nearest plateau with a sizeable population, some three hundred kilometres to the south, apparently named for the explorer who first catalogued this patchwork globe.

55. More likely they'd been switched off by automatic systems, in the absence of any fresh raw material to process.

56. In all honesty, looking back, none spring to mind.

57. Estimates vary between about 1,500 and just over 3,000. Records of that time are, understandably, somewhat fragmentary.

58. The 597th was the only regiment currently on Periremunda with previous experience of fighting tyrannids, although the Karthelan 463rd had taken part in the cleansing of the Taragon underhive following the discovery of a recently established genestealer cult there in 929 M41.

59. In fact Zyvan probably chose his words carefully to reflect the fact that it wasn't just humans the tyrannids were taking: the settlements they'd attacked were denuded of all forms of life, including plants and domestic animals.

60. Despite the eminence to which she would later rise, Cain's attitude towards Sulla remains, at best, one of mild antipathy throughout his memoirs. She, ironically, appears to have remained in lifelong ignorance of his actual opinion of her, clearly regarding him as something of a mentor.

61. No doubt it did, frequently, but Zyvan was too conscientious a servant of the Emperor to risk Imperial interests, or the lives of the ordinary soldiers under his command, simply to rid himself of a trifling nuisance. Besides, there would always be plenty more to replace them, so any respite would have been fleeting at best.

62. In actual fact, later events would point to a quite different interpretation of the Gravalax incident. The 'stealer cult there, as Cain points out in his own account of the affair, was intent on provoking a

war of attrition with the tau, which would have seriously weakened the Imperium's defences throughout the Damocles Gulf and its neighbouring sectors. Given the line of advance of Hive Fleet Kraken, it now seems more than probable that they were intending to prepare the way for this massive invasion force rather than a mere splinter fleet.

63. Elements of the 597th were deployed in support of the PDF on three separate occasions during this period, managing to repulse the tyranid attack entirely on one of them, and holding it off for long enough to successfully complete the evacuation of the surviving civilians before retreating in good order themselves in both of the other engagements. Their previous experience of fighting this particular xenos breed no doubt stood them in good stead, and the positive effect on morale these victories had went well beyond the regiment itself.

64. Cain's account of his exploits during the 13th Black Crusade, though fascinating, need not detain us at this juncture.

65. Or perhaps because of them: they all seem to have lost around fifteen per cent of their initial complement (the vast majority of the fatalities being the inevitable 'funks'), a remarkably low total considering the nature of their foe. Not to mention the heartening effect that seeing the tyranids break and run must have had on the survivors of the massacre on Corania.

66. Despite Cain's cynicism, Sulla did indeed enjoy the confidence and respect of the troops she led, almost to the extent that he claims. She undeniably had a tendency to take risks a more cautious commander would think twice about, but as is so often the case her willingness to seize the initiative often proved decisive at a critical juncture, and the concomitant slightly higher casualty rates in her platoon seemed to have been more than offset by its members' astonishingly high morale.

67. Binary, as it's apparently known, remains a complete mystery to anyone outside the Adeptus Mechanicus. Despite decades of intensive study, the sisters of the Ordo Dialogous have yet to establish even the most rudimentary rules of grammar and syntax.

68. Though barely high enough to receive much in the way of rainfall, the dense mat of foliage covering Aceralbaterra respired moisture constantly, which condensed almost at once in the thick, humid air.

69. No doubt Sulla's earlier mention of the verdant deathworld had stuck in Cain's mind.

70. Cain is presumably writing with the benefit of hindsight here, since, although the concentric rings of hastily prepared fortifications would be visible from the air, he would have had little detailed knowledge of the course of the battle up to this point.

71. An impression certainly received by Jenit Sulla, whose prolonged description of Cain's 'noble bearing' in her account of the deployment is gushing in the extreme.

72. Vox operator, a common abbreviation among Guard personnel.

73. Every plateau's militia had its own colour scheme, generally as garish as the civilian fashions Cain noted earlier. The Aceralbaterrans, for instance, favoured orange fatigues under green and purple striped body armour, while the defence forces of Principia Mons appeared to prefer a combination of bright red and iridescent blue. As the tyrannids generally rely on scent and vibration as much as sight to detect their prey, this bizarre predilection probably added less to their casualty rates than would have been the case with most other foes.

74. Although Cain would be able to contact pretty much anyone on the planet by relaying his signal through the vox equipment in Sulla's command Chimera, the sisters of the White Rose were apparently using their own communication system independent of the Imperial Guard network. Only as the two sets of short-range personal vox systems came into close proximity was he able to talk to them directly.

75. Given that the commissarial uniform has a cap rather than any more functionally protective headgear, Cain may be speaking from the heart here.

76. Apparently because most of them believe that their faith in the Emperor is armour enough. A couple of extra centimetres of ceremite probably couldn't hurt, though.

77. Given the heat and humidity on Aceralbaterra, most of the iceworlders would have stripped down to little more than their body armour, and trousers, of course.

78. Cain's fencing tutor at the schola progenium.

79. Given Cain's repeated references to the near-constant cloud cover over Hoarfell, we can quite safely conclude that Sulla is exaggerating here for dramatic effect. Readers wanting a rather more accurate account of the battle in space are referred to chapter 87 of Leander Kasmides's *Swatting the Swarm: The Evolution of Imperial Navy Tactics Against the Hive Fleets*.

80. Anyone caring to wade through the details can find them in Sulla's memoirs, in which she recounts the action at stupefying length.

81. As I've previously mentioned, the 597th routinely split its squads into two fireteams of five troopers each. Team one would be under the command of the sergeant leading the squad, while team two would be led by the assistant squad leader, normally a corporal, when operating independently.

82. Whether or not a blank can affect the functioning of the tyranid hive mind is still a matter of some conjecture. Jorgen was certainly able to disrupt the brood telepathy of genestealer groups on more than one occasion, but, as in so many cases where anti-psyker phenomena are concerned, in a somewhat erratic fashion, and I can recall no instance where he unquestionably disrupted the overmind itself.

83. The home plateau of the three psykers Cain and Jorgen had encountered on Hoarfell.

84. He would have been, had I seen any reason to bring them to his attention.

85. Though the Gavarronian PDF would, in theory, be under the jurisdiction of a commissar specifically attached to them, in practice the luckless individual in question had been given the task of overseeing morale and disciplinary matters for the PDF of the entire system, along with those of another thirty-seven equally sparsely settled Imperial worlds within the sector. As a result, Commissar Banning spent almost all his time in his cabin aboard one starship

after another, drinking heavily, leaving the vast majority of the troopers nominally under his care in blissful ignorance of his existence.

86. A common custom on many of the worlds around the Damocles Gulf, in which citizens celebrate holy festivals with amateur theatrical performances drawn from the lives of the saints or the Emperor, in which devotional material is inextricably linked with the most vulgar of knockabout comedy.

87. At the time of which he's writing Cain had yet to visit one of the tau's own worlds, but he was certainly familiar with their architectural style from his time on Gravalax, so the analogy might indeed have struck him then, rather than being the product of several decades' hindsight as might otherwise be inferred.

88. The 597th's senior drill instructor.

89. More likely they trusted the Emperor to protect them from harm; quite ironically, as things turned out.

90. A fireteam reduced in number by the loss of casualties, but still able to be deployed effectively. Short squads, known to the troopers as 'remnants', are a common feature of many Guard platoons, and are often little more than independent fireteams themselves in all but name.

91. The full quotation, from The Precepts of Saint Emelia, a work Cain displays a surprising fondness for in several passages of his memoirs, runs "The path of duty is often a stony one, made smoother by thought for others."

92. At the time, I just thought having a celebrated hero in the vicinity would draw attention away from my own activities. The effect this had on Killian, luring him into showing his hand openly, was merely a welcome bonus. (Though not to Cain, obviously.)

93. A talent he displayed on many occasions, and which he attributed to his upbringing on a hive world.

94. An Inquisitorial mandate tends to impress people; probably something to do with all those seals.

95. Displacer fields are never completely reliable, so it's always advisable to present the lowest possible target profile even if you're carrying an active one.

96. A form of bayonet, much favoured by the Adepta Sororitas.

97. Cain may be exaggerating here, but my own recollections of that engagement are too fragmentary to be sure.

98. Or, rather more plausibly, the hive mind singled him out as the greatest threat among us.

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TRAITOR'S GAMBIT

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Editorial Note:

This is one of the longer fragments scattered throughout the Cain Archive and, as it's reasonably self-contained, I've resisted the temptation to incorporate it into the more comprehensive account of his activities during this period that I'm currently compiling.

Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos.

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As I've mentioned before in the course of these memoirs, my life has held more than its fair share of surprises. One of the rare pleasant ones had been my appointment to the position of Commissarial Liaison Officer to the staff of the Lord General, apparently at the instigation of Zyvan himself: we'd always got on tolerably well, and I suppose he liked the idea of furthering our acquaintance under more congenial circumstances. Of course I still found myself dragged off to one warzone after another, but at least being attached to the upper echelons kept me away from the noise a bit more than hitherto. (Not as much as I'd have liked, of course, as my duties still took me a lot closer to the battlefield than Zyvan usually ventured, and the nature of the posting meant that Amberley was able to find me more easily whenever she had a particularly life-threatening errand to drop in my lap, but I can't deny her more frequent appearances had a definite upside too.¹)

So, by the early weeks of 990, life was looking pretty good to me. We'd just arrived in the Deepwater system, along with a naval task force and a couple of dozen troop transports, ostensibly to show the flag and reassure our loyal citizens that the forces of the Emperor stood ever ready to protect them from the rapacious ambitions of the tau: although, as usual, the aliens had managed to persuade a sizable chunk of the population that they'd be better off embracing the greater good and defecting *en masse*. At least the situation hadn't deteriorated as badly as it had done on Gravalax, but things were getting uncomfortable enough for the local Governor to seem heartily pleased at our arrival.

To my surprise, I was quite favourably impressed by the man the first time

we met. I've come across a number of Planetary Governors in the course of my erratic progress around the galaxy and, on the whole, the ones who weren't incompetent were either corrupt, insane, or both; on at least one occasion sufficiently so to have mortgaged their soul and the world they administered to the forces of the Ruinous Powers.

There have been exceptions, however, and Landen Hoy was definitely one of those; a vigorous man of about my own age,² whose greying temples imparted an air of wisdom and gravitas to his bearing, and who ruled his fiefdom in the Emperor's name with what seemed to me to be a reasonable degree of competence and integrity.

Unusually for a civilian, he'd been able to grasp the tactical implications of the situation when Zyvan and I pointed them out to him on our first (and, as things turned out, only) visit to the Gubernatorial Palace. As the name implied, Deepwater was an aquatic world, with no land at all to speak of apart from the occasional island chain, so most of the population lived in hive cities anchored to the seabed; from these roots the spires soared into the air above, often for a kilometre or more, to form glass and steel reefs capable of withstanding anything the elements were capable of throwing at them. A warren of tunnels and mineshafts sprawled out from the underhives, to pillage the rich store of minerals lying beneath the waves, and periodically threaten the occasional sump community with drowning when they breached. A hiver myself, I found the place a strange mixture of the comfortably nostalgic and the outlandish, savouring the salt tang in the air as an honour guard of Hoy's household troops escorted us through tapestry-shrouded corridors towards our destination. A larger contingent of Zyvan's personal guard trotted in our wake, keeping them covered. The Lord General hadn't risen to his current eminence by being overly reckless, and was all too aware of how big a gift his sudden removal would be to the enemies of Him on Earth.

Hoy received us in a well-appointed room below the waterline, where couches upholstered in powder-blue silk were arranged to give the best possible view of the fish swimming around the reef beyond the thick sheet of armourcrys forming the far wall. The spectacle was stunning, but I was too seasoned a campaigner to have my attention diverted that easily, and shook the hand of our host with an easy assurance I thought would best match the mental picture he undoubtedly had of a Hero of the Imperium. He returned it firmly, then bowed formally to Zyvan.

‘I can’t deny I’m pleased to see you,’ he said, reseating himself on a sofa and gesturing a servitor forward to offer drinks. I selected an amasec from the array of decanters on the tray, finding it surprisingly indifferent, but masked my disappointment easily. ‘The xenoists have been gaining ground among the populace, in spite of everything we do to discourage them. If nothing else, your arrival means they can’t keep spreading the lie that we’ve been abandoned by the Imperium.’

‘And you won’t be,’ Zyvan assured him, clearly finding the amasec no more palatable than I had. The Tau Empire had managed to annex several Imperial systems in the region over the last few years simply because, with the growing menace of the tyranid hive fleets, we hadn’t had the resources to defend them properly. In fact, if the ‘nids hadn’t been as much of a problem for them as they were for us, they’d probably have wrapped up half the sector by now.³ Enough was enough, and Deepwater was where we’d decided to draw the line; the resources extracted here were vital both militarily and economically. If it fell, we’d all be feeling the pinch.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ Hoy said, with a nod towards a pile of papers on a small table close to his elbow. They were too far away for me to read from where I was sitting, but I didn’t need to anyway, as I’d authorised their release to him personally. It had simply been meant as a gesture of trust, and the idea that he’d actually bothered to read the material was as much a surprise to me as it clearly was to Zyvan. ‘Especially as it seems you’re needed in other systems too.’

‘That still remains to be seen,’ I said, cautiously. The star cluster of which Deepwater was a part was far too vulnerable to a sudden tau attack for my peace of mind, or Zyvan’s too, come to that; so the strategy we’d determined on was the old one of a mobile defence, moving from system to system as unpredictably as possible. The tau couldn’t know which system the fleet would be in next, and would have to mount an invasion force sufficiently powerful to overcome it wherever they tried. Even if we weren’t there when they arrived, the existing defences should be enough to bog them down long enough for our flotilla to respond, and tip the balance in the Imperium’s favour. We hoped. Of course, if our intelligence turned out to be wrong about the resources they had available, we’d be royally frakked, but I’d worry about that when the time came, if it ever did. ‘At the moment, the protection of Deepwater is our highest priority.’

‘I’d be interested in any suggestions you might have,’ Hoy said, ignoring

the amasec, and reaching for an unfamiliar drink at the back of the tray. He smiled. 'Have a nagila? I'm afraid our local amasec isn't up to much. Hardly anywhere to grow the grain, for one thing.'

I took the local beverage, and sipped cautiously, finding it a great deal more appetising than the contents of my abandoned glass. I thought briefly about asking what it was made from, then decided I probably didn't want to know.

'Our first priority is to assess the state of readiness of the assets you already have in-system,' Zyvan said, as agreeably surprised as I was. He nodded at me. 'That will be Commissar Cain's job. Once he's done that, we can institute any additional training measures that seem necessary, purge the outstandingly incompetent officers, raise any additional manpower the PDF requires, and garrison a Guard regiment or two here to make up any deficiencies which may remain.' He regarded the Governor seriously over the rim of his glass. 'I trust you have no objection to that?'

'None whatsoever,' Hoy assured him. He returned his gaze to me. 'In fact I'm due to begin a tour of the offworld habs and void stations the day after tomorrow. If you'd care to tag along, I'm sure you'll find my yacht a good deal more comfortable than a military shuttle.'

Well, it would have been churlish to refuse, and the thought of spending the best part of a month cooped up in an Aquila with Jurgen wasn't exactly the most congenial prospect I could imagine, so I made a brief show of consideration, and nodded. 'Thank you,' I said, little realising how wide of the mark my next four words were going to be, 'that sounds very pleasant.'

My first impression of the *Wavecrest* did nothing to dispel the fond illusion that, for once, I'd fallen on my feet, and could expect more of a luxury cruise than a tour of inspection. My stateroom was as lavishly appointed as anything I'd come to expect since joining Zyvan's staff; almost too much so, the mattress on the bed being so yielding that climbing into it was more like being swallowed by a patch of tangle moss than an attempt to rest. After one sleepless night, troubled by dreams of being digested, I instructed Jurgen to remove it, and found the more utilitarian padding of the frame far more to my liking.

He nodded and, to my relief, moved away from the grille of the circulator, where he'd been basking in the frigid draft,⁴ allowing his remarkable body odour to roam the room freely. Jurgen wasn't exactly the most

prepossessing soldier in the Imperial Guard: in fact I'd seen troopers who'd been dead for several days and still looked more presentable than he did. That said, he possessed a number of qualities which made him the perfect aide, not the least of which was a literal-minded obduracy in following orders, coupled with an unshakable faith in my judgement second only to his reverence for the Emperor Himself. He'd saved my life on more occasions than either of us could remember, although I tried not to bother him with anything which involved counting above ten, as I suspected that might involve the removal of his socks, a prospect to leave even an ork shuddering.

'Mine was the same,' he said, glaring at the offending mattress. 'Wouldn't have had a wink of sleep if I hadn't turfed it on the floor.' He had a small cabin adjacent to mine, an arrangement common to the guest quarters, where it seemed to be assumed that the occupants would require their valets, maids, coiffurists, or whatever, kept readily to hand. I hadn't had occasion to venture inside, but the glimpses I'd had through the doorway had left me in no doubt that Jurgen had made himself as much at home as he ever did, in a hrud's nest of abandoned meals, discarded underwear and porno slates. I had no idea who was going to tidy up in there after we disembarked, but strongly suspected that whoever got the job would have severely hacked off their superior shortly before.

Overstuffed mattresses notwithstanding, I found the bulk of the voyage as enjoyable as I'd anticipated. We spent almost a month ricocheting from one outpost to another, where Hoy would disembark to confer with the local Administratum adepts, while I put the fear of the Emperor into whatever System Defence Force personnel I could find lounging about the place. In general, I have to admit, I was quite favourably impressed; they weren't up to the standard of Guard or Navy regulars, of course, or they'd have been swept up in the manpower tithes, but they were competent enough to give the tau a bloody nose if push came to shove. Not for long, of course; they'd be overwhelmed in a matter of days, but the bluies would know they'd been in a fight, and, Emperor willing, be weakened enough for our fleet to have the edge when we turned up to liberate the system again.

Between outposts, we generally had two or three days coasting through open space, which were the next best thing to a holiday. I still had plenty of work to do, of course, remaining in vox contact with Zyvan, and keeping up-to-date with the latest intelligence reports, but, as ever, Jurgen was an

invaluable bulwark against the more onerous aspects of my job, deflecting most of the paperwork with his usual efficiency.

That left me free to play the diplomatic game, mingling with the usual collection of aristocratic parasites and senior bureaucrats who accrete round a Governor's household, and who were all gratifyingly aware of my unmerited reputation. By playing an adroit combination of the bluff old soldier and the modest hero I was able to milk them for a fair amount of useful intelligence, which I duly passed on to Zyvan, and a couple of morsels of information about the most probable tau sympathisers in positions of influence, which I sent straight to Amberley.

Without doubt, though, the most agreeable aspect of the voyage was the chance to socialise with Hoy; he invited me to his quarters for dinner on several occasions, where Styne, his personal chef, demonstrated an ability with fish dishes bordering on genius.⁵ The meal over, we'd retire to the somewhat gaudy lounge, where we'd play a game or two of regicide in front of the armourcrys wall giving on to a spectacular view of the Emperor's demesne, and I'd exaggerate outrageously about my experiences in the front line of its defence.

'It sounds a near miracle that you're here at all,' Hoy said, knocking back his goblet of nagila, and glancing around for a refill. 'Like another?'

I glanced up from the regicide board, where I was on the verge of losing my third game in a row, grateful for the distraction. I'd have preferred to get my tarot deck out, to tell the truth, but I had a feeling that the Governor would consider that a rather vulgar pastime, and if he started getting competitive I'd never be able to afford to match his bets anyway. 'No thanks,' I said, considering the offer. Nagila was all very well in its way, but it had a slightly cloying aftertaste, and I was beginning to miss the cleaner flavour of my favourite tipple. 'I'll take an amasec this time.'

'If you're sure,' Hoy said, looking faintly surprised, and signalling for a servant. Unusually, there were none around, as he'd dismissed them all from his quarters after dinner. Unlike most aristos I've come across, he was sensible enough to realise that servants are people too, and liable to gossip about anything they've overheard. 'But I'd have thought you'd prefer something a little better than what we've got to offer.'

'I do,' I said, knowing him well enough by now to be certain that he wouldn't mistake candour for a slight against his home world. 'And I've got a particularly fine bottle in my quarters.' If Zyvan was aware that it was

missing from his personal stock, he'd been too polite to mention it. 'As this is our last night before making orbit again,' I went on, 'I can't think of a better time to share it.'

Hoy nodded, slowly. Once we got back to Deepwater, our respective duties would make it all but impossible to spend a convivial evening together again, so we might as well make the most of it while we could. 'By all means,' he agreed, and pressed the switch on the arm of his chair again. The servants seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time to respond. 'Have your man bring it round.'

I stood, a little more carefully than I'd anticipated; nagila may not have been entirely to my taste, but there was no denying it was powerful stuff. 'I'll fetch it myself,' I said. So far I'd managed to keep Jurgen out of the Governor's way, and felt it would be prudent if I continued to do so.

'Probably best,' Hoy agreed, pressing the call button again with a hint of impatience. 'If he's anything like my staff, we could die of thirst before he got here.'

'Quite,' I agreed diplomatically, and slipped out of the Governor's quarters. As the solid gold doors slid closed behind me, the palms of my hands began to itch; a presentiment I'd learned long ago not to ignore, even when, as now, there seemed no obvious reason for disquiet. Loosening my laspistol in its holster I began to walk down the corridor, used by this time to the slightly springy sensation underfoot imparted by the luxuriant carpet. My footfalls were all but silent, and I strained my ears for any sound out of the ordinary.

I could hear nothing unusual, although that brought little comfort. In my experience, it's what you don't notice that kills you. The circulators were humming quietly, and the constant thrumming of the engines, felt through the bones rather than heard, was as steady as ever.

That was when it hit me: not a sound out of place, but the absence of one. Ever since we'd boarded, I'd been aware of the faint murmur of a human presence, mingling with the other noises; now that nebulous amalgam of distant voices, clattering tools and the footfalls of the lowly toiling in the uncarpeted regions of the ship had vanished completely. Certain by now that something had gone badly awry, I drew my sidearm, and loosened my trusty chainsword in its scabbard.

Rounding the next junction in the corridor, I tensed, seeing a flash of movement in the distance, then began to relax. Hoy's servants were

responding to his summons at last, three of them, the gold highlights of their livery flashing as they caught the radiance of the overhead luminators.

I was just on the brink of hailing them, when something about the way they were moving started my palms tingling afresh. They were spread out, like an infantry team advancing into hostile territory, the two on the flanks glancing down each side corridor as they approached it, while the third kept his gaze on the main passageway ahead. I just had time to register the comm-bead in his ear, and the laspistol gripped in his hand, when our eyes locked.

The odds hardly seemed fair; three to one it may have been, but I've spent a lifetime fending off attempts to kill me, generally by things a great deal more formidable than a gaggle of civilian insurrectionists who barely knew one end of a gun barrel from another. I hesitated for a fraction of a second, just to make sure I wasn't misreading the situation, but the moment the pointman stopped gawking at me he began to bring his pistol up, which just goes to show what a frakbrain he was. I'd already got him in my sights, and dropped him with a single shot before he could even come close to threatening me.

The other two were a bit quicker off the mark, although neither seemed to have registered my presence until the *snap* of ionising air from my las-bolt and the muffled thud of their friend hitting the carpet brought their heads round with identical expressions of stupefied astonishment. I couldn't take them both before they retaliated, though; they were too widely separated, so I cracked off a snapshot at the woman on the left, which despite missing made a nasty mess of some gaudy frescoes millimetres from her head, and dived for cover behind a pedestal supporting a marble bust of some dyspeptic-looking predecessor of Hoy's.

The man on the right recovered first, returning fire with far more enthusiasm than accuracy, and going to ground behind a large ceramic urn, which my next las-bolt shattered most satisfactorily. I followed up with a second as soon as I could squeeze the trigger again, blessing the extra speed and steadiness my augmetic fingers gave me, and he collapsed among the shards, a bloody crater punched neatly into his torso. Seeing him fall, the woman turned and fled towards the dubious refuge of the corridor she'd been investigating, crossing half the distance in a couple of panic-lengthened strides before my next bolt took the back of her head off.

I stood slowly, making sure they didn't have friends within earshot, and

walked towards the trio of corpses, wondering what the hell was going on. It would have been flattering to think that I was their intended target, but the encounter had clearly been no more than random chance: if I hadn't had a sudden impulse to fetch the amasec from my quarters, I'd still have been sitting across the regicide board from Hoy, blithely unaware of whatever was happening.

I raised a hand to my ear, before belatedly recalling that I'd left my comm-bead in my quarters, along with instructions to Jurgen that I wasn't to be disturbed for anything less urgent than the sudden appearance of a tau battlefleet. The scapegraces who'd attacked me were all well past the point of being able to give answers, something a cursory examination made all too clear, and I was on the point of turning away when a faint hissing sound drew my attention to the leader's earpiece, which, by some miracle, was still functioning. I picked it up, and listened with interest.

'Yannis, where are you?' a female voice asked, not for the first time judging by the petulant tone beginning to creep into it. 'Team three respond! You should have met Kraven in the Governor's quarters by now!'

'None of your people can answer at the moment,' I said, the residual adrenaline buzz from the skirmish combining with the nagila still sloshing around my system to override my more cautious instincts. 'They're a bit too busy being dead.'

'Who is this?' The voice was sounding more curious than irritable now, and I had the sudden unnerving sensation of having attracted the attention of a predator, which I'd last experienced in the underhives of Hope Springs just before the genestealers started coming out of the walls. No matter, I told myself, beginning to regret my moment of uncharacteristic bravado; whoever was on the other end of the vox-link could hardly talk me to death.

'Commissar Cain,' I said, injecting a dash of the insouciant self-assurance I liked to project in my younger days, whenever there were impressionable young ladies in the room.⁶ 'And you would be...?'

'Entirely unconcerned,' the voice replied, with what the owner no doubt hoped was withering scorn. Having survived the displeasure of a number of women over the years, including an inquisitor, the heiress to a planet, and a sorceress who came back from the dead as a daemon,⁷ I was singularly unimpressed. 'You'll be dead soon enough.'

'Forgive me if this sounds a little ungallant,' I riposted, 'but I've heard that before.' I was already moving as I spoke, jogging back to Hoy's quarters,

alert for any sound betraying the approach of another squad of turncoat retainers. I didn't think the woman would be stupid enough to issue orders to the rest of her brigands on the frequency we were using to converse, but I kept the channel open anyway on general principles.

'Hanar, this is Roxwell,' a new voice broke in after a moment, and I blessed the lack of imagination of the average civilian. The earpieces they'd been issued with were on a preset frequency, so it hadn't occurred to anyone to change them. 'The enginarium's secured.'

'Bully for you,' I cut in, scenting the chance for a bit of misdirection. 'Let's see how long it takes me to loosen it up again.' I hadn't the slightest intention of going anywhere near the place, of course. But with any luck my shadowy enemies would be so taken with my hollow reputation that they'd dig in there, expecting me to burst through the door, diverting enough reinforcements to pretty much give me the run of the rest of the ship. Which, now I came to think about it, wasn't all that big, at least compared to the warp-going transports I'd spent so much of my life aboard.

Besides, it was clear from the first thing I'd overheard that Hoy was either a target, or involved in the conspiracy, and on the whole the former was far more likely. If I could get to him before Kraven, whoever the hell that was, with any luck he'd be able to give me some answers about whatever was going on.

As I approached the Governor's quarters I slowed my pace, checking the charge in my laspistol's powerpack, and drawing my chainsword. The golden doors were open, and a cape of chill presentiment settled itself around my shoulders.

On entering, a single glance was all it took to confirm my worst fears. The Governor was dead, most of his torso seared away by an energy bolt of quite staggering power; I'd seen the damage done by plasma weapons often enough to recognise it, and felt an even stronger sense of foreboding than before. Whoever Hanar's people were, they were well resourced; plasma weapons were rare to say the least, and the vast majority of them firmly in the hands of the Emperor's faithful servants.

Palms tingling anew, I edged further inside, keeping my back to the wall and an eye on the door. My erstwhile drinking companion had clearly been taken by surprise, but hadn't gone down without a fight; there was another body sprawled across the carpet, dressed in the plain utilitarian uniform of a member of the ship's crew, the small, neat hole punched through his

forehead confirming the suspicion I'd long harboured that the ornate ring on Hoy's index finger was a digital weapon of some kind.

I swept the room rapidly, but the mere fact that my head was still attached to my shoulders was enough to confirm that the assassin had been alone. Besides which, if he'd had any companions with him, they would undoubtedly have recovered the weapon he'd dropped when Hoy took his final revenge. (It was actually hard to tell who'd died first, as the final involuntary muscle spasm could have triggered either weapon, but given the manifest accuracy of Hoy's shot, my money would have been on the Governor beating his assailant to the punch. Just his hard luck that Kraven had been armed in the way he was; a las or autopistol might well have missed Hoy altogether, but the plasma bolt had expanded as it travelled.)

I bent to pick up the assassin's handgun from the floor, rescabbing my chainsword to do so, although I'd have kissed an ork before I let go of my laspistol at that point. The handgun's smooth surface, devoid of devotional icons and the seals of sanctification bestowed by the tech-priests, bespoke its unhallowed origins, and I was unable to suppress a shudder of revulsion as I closed my hand around it. It was of tau origin, I'd seen enough of their xenos tech over the years to be certain of that, and a grim conclusion began to force its way into my thoughts. Hoy's assassination was almost certainly a decapitation strike, intended to sow confusion and discord in advance of a xenos invasion, which meant that an all-out attack on the Deepwater system must be imminent.

I took a deep breath, forcing down my spiralling fears. I knew where the vox room was from my periodic reports to Zyvan; all I had to do was reach it, and warn the fleet. Of course I'd have to make my way through an indeterminate number of xenos sympathisers to get there, but I'd faced far worse odds than that before, and I was still around to tell the tale.

Despite my misgivings, I tucked the plasma pistol into the sash at my waist before leaving the room, as gingerly as if it was a greech egg.⁸ It was clear evidence of the xenos's involvement which would convince even the most sceptical of Zyvan's underlings, and I was sure Amberley would appreciate the chance to do whatever it is inquisitors do with unhallowed artefacts.⁹

I was on the point of leaving, when I noticed that the prostrate assassin had a comm-bead in his ear as well, and, struck by an idea, retuned the one I'd confiscated from the late and unlamented Yannis.

‘Kraven. Are you receiving?’ Hanar’s voice came through almost at once, and I smiled grimly to myself as I slipped out of the room. No harm in dividing the opposition up even further, I thought; by the time they responded, I’d be long gone.

‘Hello again, Hanar,’ I said. ‘Kraven’s dead. Can I take a message?’ I trotted along the corridor, keeping an eye out for any more insurrectionists, but the whole ship seemed eerily quiet and still. I soon found the reason for that; as I rounded a corner, I almost stumbled over the corpses of a couple of ladies’ maids, evidently gunned down as they tried to flee, and any thoughts I might have had about offering terms of surrender to the pirates evaporated abruptly. Civilian casualties are a sad inevitability of warfare, but any true servant of the Emperor tries to avoid harming His subjects as much as possible. Casual butchery like this was the mark of creatures like the orks, or debased followers of the Ruinous Powers, and for the first time I began to appreciate just how ruthless my foes were in pursuit of their agenda.

The unfortunate women were just the first of many, I discovered, as I made my way through the passageways; servant and plenipotentiary alike had been slaughtered where they stood, or, more frequently, as they ran or tried to make a fight of it. The guest quarters, where most of the local aristocracy and adepts had been sleeping when the insurrectionists began their coup, was a charnel house. I approached my own stateroom with a rising sense of foreboding, fearing to find my aide among the casualties at any moment but to my relief, both my own room and Jurgen’s were empty, only the faint residue of his body odour remaining to confirm that he’d been there at all. Where he’d gone I had no idea, but his lasgun was missing as well, which was a good sign. Like any Guardsman, he’d as soon be parted from his right arm as his weapon, and I was certain he’d be prepared to use it.

As reassured as it was possible to be under the circumstances, I picked up the bottle of amasec from my quarters, and slipped it into my greatcoat pocket after a quick restorative gulp. So fine an example of the distiller’s art undoubtedly deserved better, but I didn’t have time to savour it properly, and I was damned if I was going to leave it for a bunch of murdering brigands. Then, as ready as I was ever going to be, I set off for the vox room.

Having been aboard the *Wavecrest* for the best part of a month, I had a reasonable idea of the layout, which my innate sense of spatial awareness in

enclosed environments had helped to sharpen. Ever since Kari had conducted me through the service passages of the *Hand of Vengeance* during the ork attack off Perlia, I had cultivated the habit of making a quiet mental note of the hatchways giving access to these areas on every vessel I'd travelled aboard, so I had a rough idea of how they interconnected as well. On a troopship or military vessel these would be guarded by security codes, which I generally found some way to get my hands on, but in the case of the *Wavecrest* the opportunity hadn't arisen, so I supposed I'd be stuck in the main corridors. That was irksome, as I was sure Hanar's people would be searching them diligently by now, but for an old hiver like me playing hunt the sumprat in a maze of passageways was second nature, so I was certain I'd still have the edge.

It all seemed to go fine at first. I knew the vox room was three decks up from the guest quarters, near the bridge, so I headed for the nearest stairwell. There were lifts too, of course, but I'd got far too much sense to box myself in, waiting to be gunned down like a trakki.¹⁰ I'd be keeping them covered if I was Hanar, and, from what I'd seen, whoever she was, she was far from stupid.

As I approached the stairwell I heard voices. It seemed I'd read my unseen enemy right, and she had enough manpower spare to cover the stairwells too. Drawing my chainsword again, I flattened myself against the side of the corridor, and peered cautiously around the angle of the walls.

Sure enough, there was a reception committee waiting for me, two more fellows in the livery of servants, another crewman, and a fourth individual whose presence came as a real surprise. I'd last seen him at a cotillion in the ballroom a couple of nights before, where he'd droned on about the economics of fish ranching and the extent of his family estates at tedious length, before asking what I now realised had been a few artfully ingenuous questions about the Imperial Guard regiments embedded in our task force. (Which I'd declined to answer, of course, in favour of embroidering a few of my own past exploits, much to my retrospective relief.) It seemed that the conspiracy included members of the Deepwater aristocracy, as well as the lower orders, and from the easy manner in which the fellow was conversing with his social inferiors, the pernicious notion of egalitarianism held out by the tau had evidently found converts even among those with the most to lose from its adoption.

I observed the group of traitors for a few more moments, before

concluding that any attempt to get past them to the stairs would be doomed to failure. They had room to scatter in the wide landing, and if I mistimed my attack, they could separate and pick me off. At least one of the group had a comm-bead, too, and I couldn't see the others clearly enough to be sure that he was the only one; if any of the heretics was able to vox a warning before I killed them all, the net would be closing around me faster than you could say 'The Emperor protects'.

I was on the verge of slinking away when it suddenly dawned on me that the fellow with the visible earpiece appeared to be engaged in an urgent conversation, although none of his companions seemed to be responding. Intrigued, I tried retuning the set in my ear again, and was almost instantly rewarded with the sound of Hanar's voice. It seemed she learned fast, and was switching frequencies in an attempt to keep me from listening in.

'Hold your position,' she said, sounding a little miffed that no one had reported killing me by now. 'He can't get off that deck without using one of the stairways or elevators, and when he tries, we'll have him.'

'Can you get another team down here to help sweep the corridors?' the aristo asked, confirming my suspicion that more than one of the group was in the comm-net. 'Roxwell says he's already set the fusion reactors to overload, so his group aren't needed in the enginarium any more.'

A sliver of ice seemed to enter my spinal cord as he spoke. It seemed that the traitors were preparing to cover their tracks by destroying the *Wavecrest* entirely, making the loss of the Governor look like a tragic accident. I'd seen spacecraft reactors breach before, although in most cases the catastrophe had been triggered by a lance or torpedo volley. I knew that once they'd carried out their dastardly plan, there would be nothing left of the yacht beyond a cloud of superheated plasma, burning like a brief, miniature sun, consuming everything within a couple of kilometres of the explosion point.

To hell with the vox room, I thought, it was time to start looking for an escape pod. I withdrew carefully round the corner, and considered my options. The launch racks were all on the deck below, on the reasonable assumption that anyone on the upper levels would head for the shuttle hangars in an emergency, which meant I had to get past the pickets after all.

Suppressing the impulse to join in the conversation this time, I listened to Hanar's reply with considerable interest.

'No,' she said, to my immense relief. 'Roxwell stays put. They're already

welding the doors shut down there. Cain said he's on his way to retake the place, so he can waste his time trying to get in if he ever makes it that far. Even if he does, they'll be waiting.'

I digested this with some puzzlement, wondering how they intended getting out before the reactor blew if they were sealing the room, before the full extent of their fanaticism finally dawned on me. They weren't going to. This was a suicide mission, at least for some of them; and for all I knew, the entire cabal was intending to go down with the ship. Which simply didn't make sense. They'd achieved their objective, so far as I could see. Why not stick around to enjoy it, and get a pat on the back from their alien masters?

Well, as I've remarked on more than one occasion, heretics are all deranged by definition, although this was more the kind of thing I'd expect from Chaos worshippers than the followers of the so-called Greater Good. I gave up trying to understand it in favour of staying alive, which has always been one of my favourite occupations. However you looked at it, things were grim. I was just on the verge of chancing the stairs anyway, and trusting to the Emperor to watch my back in the regrettable absence of Jurgen, when the initiative was abruptly wrested out of my hands.

'There he is!' someone shouted, an instant before a las-bolt detonated against the wall, far enough from where I was standing to induce apoplexy in the average Imperial Guard small arms instructor. I spun round, already bringing up my laspistol, to see a trio of crewmen charging towards me with all the finesse of a rabble of gretchin, brandishing handguns of their own as they came. I put a las-bolt through the one who'd shot at me, as he was marginally in front, and to my immense satisfaction he tripped the others as he fell. I was about to pick them off before they could rise again, when a stubber round ricocheted from the wall behind me. I turned, to find the party from the stairwell rounding the corner, the light of murder in their eyes, and brought my pistol up, while looking desperately around for some cover.

There was none. By sheer bad luck I was between cross passageways, nothing to my right or left but the burnished metal walls. There was nothing else for it but to trust in the Emperor, and try to keep them rattled enough not to shoot straight, so I bellowed 'Waaaaaaaagggggghhhhh!' with all the gusto of an ork, and charged at them, chainsword swinging, and depleting the power pack of my laspistol as rapidly as I could pull the trigger. Of course I didn't have a hope of accuracy under the circumstances, even a

skilled marksman¹¹ finding it all but impossible to hit a moving target while running. But Him on Earth must have been looking over my shoulder after all, because one of my wild lasbolts caught the renegade aristo on the upper arm just as he pulled the trigger of another tau-made plasma pistol, making the shot go wide and punching a molten hole in the wall of the corridor.

I was still a few strides short of being able to bring the chainsword into play, though, and to my chagrin the sight of it wasn't causing them to falter as I'd hoped. It's a formidable looking weapon, and generally an untrained opponent doesn't have the nerve to face one without flinching, being able to picture it shearing through their own tender flesh all too vividly. Untrained they may have been, but they were fanatics, prepared to die for their cause, and they held their ground, bringing their weapons on aim, each one certain that if he fell, one of his friends would kill me an instant later. Not only that, the two survivors behind me would be climbing to their feet by now, preparing to shoot me in the back.

As I've remarked before, even the slimmest chance is better than no chance at all, so I did the one thing I hoped they wouldn't expect, diving forwards into a roll, hoping to close the distance and take the legs out from under them with the humming blade before they could readjust their aim. No sooner had I hit the carpet than a blizzard of lasbolts scorched the air above me, the distinctive overlapping crackle of a lasgun on full auto echoing from the enclosing walls. As I rose to my feet to find my putative targets making a mess of the expensive floor coverings with their bodily fluids, I breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief, despite the assault on my nostrils which the act of inhaling now entailed.

'Well done, Jurgen,' I said. 'Timely as ever.' Warned by the sudden shifting of his aim, I turned and dispatched one of the crewmen behind me, a steward I vaguely remembered handing me a drink at a couple of social gatherings, and who I now found it hard not to resent having tipped, while Jurgen took out the other with a single shot to the head.

'You're welcome, sir,' he said, as phlegmatically as ever, and glanced at me. 'What do we do now?'

'Escape pod,' I said. I'd been in enough of them to know that they all carried vox-sets as a matter of course, and with the *Wavecrest* about to blow up under our feet, I'd feel far happier warning Zyvan about the imminent tau attack from the relative safety of open space than fighting our way through to the vox room. 'How did you manage to avoid getting killed with

everyone else?’

‘I hid in the service passages,’ Jurgen said, leading the way to an open access hatch in the wall which I’d barely noticed before. ‘I reckoned they wouldn’t expect us to think of that.’ He looked at me a trifle quizzically. ‘I thought you’d be doing the same.’

‘How did you get the access codes?’ I asked, not bothering to waste any more time on being surprised. Jurgen’s ability to scrounge the most unlikely things bordered on the preternatural, and if anyone had been able to get their hands on secure information like that it would have been him.

His expression grew even more puzzled. ‘Access codes?’ he repeated blankly, and it belatedly dawned on me that the locking plate such hatches generally had was missing. Apparently it simply wouldn’t occur to the kind of passenger the *Wavecrest* usually carried that the utility areas even existed, let alone that they might be entered.

‘Never mind,’ I said, drawing the hatchway closed behind us, and trying not to breathe too deeply in the confined space. ‘How did you find me?’

Jurgen shrugged. ‘They’ve killed everyone else, so I just listened out for more shooting.’ It had evidently never crossed his mind that I wouldn’t have survived, and I found the notion curiously touching.

‘We need to get to the saviour pods,’ I said. ‘They’re overloading the reactor to cover their tracks, and I don’t know how long we’ve got before it blows.’

Most people would have found that little piece of information somewhat disturbing, to say the least, but Jurgen simply nodded, as though I’d been commenting on the weather. ‘Better get a move on then, sir,’ he agreed.

We double-timed it in what I hoped was the most likely direction to find a vertical shaft, and found one with gratifying speed; I was beginning to think that the Emperor was looking out for me after all, although I have to admit I was doing my best to make things easy for Him. As I reluctantly stowed my weapons, and Jurgen slung his lasgun across his back, I looked around apprehensively. I knew some of the crew had joined the heretics, which meant that they’d be unlikely to overlook the warren of service tunnels we now found ourselves in. ‘Have you seen anyone else in here?’ I asked.

‘Not really,’ Jurgen said, to my immense relief. ‘There were a couple of traitors passing through a while back, but they didn’t notice me. They seemed a bit busy.’

‘Doing what?’ I asked, and my aide shrugged.

‘Messing about with stuff,’ he said, unhelpfully. ‘Like the cogboys do, but without the incense and the chanting.’ More tau influence, I thought. They don’t have any respect for the machine-spirits, just bullying them into compliance instead of invoking their aid with the proper rituals, and their human dupes tend to behave in the same way. Why their mechanisms don’t just stop working out of sheer pique is beyond me, but perhaps they have other methods of propitiating them.¹²

‘We’d better move quietly, then,’ I said, at least partially reassured that the notion of anyone crossing from the passenger areas to the service passages seemed to be unthinkable to the renegade crew members. I climbed down the ladder we’d found as quickly as I could, stepping from it into a low-ceilinged corridor lined with cabling. There was a body down here too, a junior engineer judging by her robes, so it seemed that not all the crew had been in on the mutiny.

Jurgen joined me a few seconds later, and glanced around, unslinging his lasgun. ‘Which way, sir?’ he asked, certain as always that I’d have the answer.

‘Down there,’ I said, indicating a passageway I was certain would take us to the saviour pods, and leading the way at a run. Despite my innate paranoia, and almost a century of discovering that when things appear to be going well it’s just because you haven’t noticed the real threat, I began to feel cautiously optimistic. Even if the saviour pods were guarded, the two of us would certainly be able to overcome any resistance, and I reached out to open the hatch leading to the corridor with a rising sense of confidence. Not enough to overcome my cautious streak, which was beginning to kick in again now the nagila was wearing off, so I kept an ear out for any stray traitors who might still be wandering around.

I was still listening to the comm-bead I’d confiscated too, switching frequencies at random, hoping to pick up more chatter, but it seemed Hanar had finally given up playing that game in favour of complete vox silence; something I hoped meant that they were too busy to worry about me any more, although I was too much of a realist to believe it.

We emerged into a wide gallery, with one of the armourcrys walls Hoy seemed to have been so fond of, and I was relieved to find no sign of anyone’s presence. No one living, at any rate; the bodies of a young couple were sprawled across one of the padded seats lining the hullward side of the concourse, evidently interrupted in the middle of a romantic tryst. The

luminators were dim here, to allow the full splendour of the stars to be appreciated, and their bluish radiance cast a chill pallor across the faces of the slaughtered lovers.

Despite the urgency of our errand, I found myself hesitating for a moment, scanning the starscape anxiously for any specks of light which might be moving, betraying the presence of marauding tau battleships already inbound, even though I knew the effort would be futile. If things had got that bad, Zyvan would have mobilised the fleet in any case, warned by the auspex traces of the invaders emerging from the warp.

Well, let them come and be damned, I thought. Once Jurgen and I had raised the alarm, they'd find themselves coasting blithely into a trap, and serve them right for the cowardly curs they were.

So thinking, I led the way towards the launching racks at a rapid rate, my stride broken only by the occasional need to hurdle another cadaver, alert for any sign of a guard but, to my surprise and relief, there didn't seem to be one. There was a small group of corpses near the furthest of the pods, which was hardly a surprise; it wasn't hard to picture them being gunned down as they attempted to reach safety by launching themselves into space.

A couple of paces behind me, Jurgen sniffed loudly. 'Something smells funny,' he said, oblivious as usual to the irony.

'Plasma discharge,' I said, recognising the mingled odours of charred meat and ozone I'd scented in Hoy's quarters, and a tingle of unease brushed through me. How many more of the heretics had those damned weapons?

There was no more time to worry about that, though, because I'd reached the nearest saviour pod, with a hearty prayer of thanks to the Emperor. As I glanced inside, however, disappointment kicked me in the gut. The interior was a mess, wrecked beyond all hope of use, the vox and the launching mechanism melted into slag by a volley of plasma blasts.

'This one's the same,' Jurgen reported, with a cursory glance at the next in line. 'And so's this.'

'Check them all,' I said, convinced that it would be futile, but clinging to the faintest shred of hope, as I always did. There might still be something we could do, or salvage, and if the worst came to the worst we'd just have to break into the enginarium, take out the heretics guarding it, and hope we could find some way of undoing whatever it was they'd done to turn the *Wavecrest* into a massive bomb.

As we reached the last pod in the line, though, Jurgen turned to me with

the slight nod he generally employed when he was pleased about something, but thought it beneath his dignity to display overmuch enthusiasm. 'This one's all right,' he said.

'Good,' I replied, hardly able to seem less cool than my aide, and stepped round the huddle of corpses impeding my progress. As I did so, I glanced down, and my palms prickled anew. This was definitely not right. They'd all been carrying weapons, the same mix of stubbers and laspistols I'd seen the heretics favour, so they couldn't have been innocent victims as I'd first assumed, but the manner of their deaths was unmistakably the work of one of their own.

Well, whatever internecine feud had erupted between the traitors was no concern of mine, so I followed Jurgen into the pod. As I did so, my foot clanked against a couple of holdalls someone had left lying on the floor, and, fearing a booby trap, I stooped to investigate. To my surprise, it was stuffed full of the kind of expensive trinkets the *Wavecrest* was littered with: small gold statues, gem encrusted data-slates, a devotional cogwheel from the engineers' chapel of the Omnissiah cast in platinum, that kind of thing. Between them, the two bags must have held a small fortune.

'Strap in,' I said, taking no further interest in the find now that I was sure it was harmless, but I might as well have saved my breath. No doubt remembering the uncomfortable manner in which we'd parted company from the *Hand of Vengeance*, Jurgen was already fastening his crash webbing, his lasgun neatly stowed at his feet. Unlike the saviour pod we'd inadvertently commandeered on that occasion, which had been commodious enough to take dozens of survivors, this one was cramped, intended for a mere handful, and the narrow seats certainly hadn't been designed with armed Guardsmen in mind, let alone a commissar with a chainsword and pistol holster. I couldn't strap myself in without taking off my weapon belt, which I did reluctantly, but kept everything as close to hand as possible; unfortunately the padding on the chair was as extravagantly yielding as the mattress I'd discarded, and I sank into it so deeply my fingertips could barely reach my weapons.

No matter, I thought, and raised my hand to punch the launching button, which the artificer had been thoughtful enough to incorporate into the armrest of every seat. Before I could activate it, however, a middle-aged woman in the robes of an Administratum scribe appeared in the hatchway, lugging another bagful of loot. Her eyes widened as she took in our

presence, and she dropped her burden to draw one of the tau pistols from the recesses of her robe in a single fluid movement.

I couldn't press the button with her standing there; if she was caught by the closing hatch the pod wouldn't launch, and if she wasn't and it did, she'd gun us both down before we could fight free of the crash webbing and reach our weapons. So I smiled instead, projecting an air of calm assurance in the hope of seizing the initiative. 'You must be Hanar,' I said, as though we'd simply run into each other at a social gathering.

'I am,' she agreed, trapped by convention into responding rather than shooting me straight away. 'And you're Cain.' Her expression flickered a little, as she got her first full-strength whiff of Jorgen, and a trace of surprise appeared on her face. 'Who's he?'

'Gunner Jorgen, my aide,' I said. 'Quite a resourceful fellow.'

'Evidently.' Her eyes took in each of us, emotionless and calculating. 'Any more of you evade the sweep?'

I shrugged. 'Who knows?' I doubted it, but it wouldn't hurt to give her something else to worry about.

'No matter.' Hanar echoed the gesture. 'Anyone else on the loose will go up with the ship, and your precious Lord General.'

'Zyvan?' I began in surprise. 'What does he...' Then the coin dropped. 'Oh, I see. That's why you're staying on board. You still need to steer this tub.'

'Quite.' The ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, and subsided again. 'The *Wavecrest*'s a gigantic torpedo, aimed right at your flagship. When it's been vaporised, and your task force is leaderless, the tau will be able to liberate the whole cluster from Imperial oppression.'

'I'm sorry to disappoint you,' I said, masking my horror at the idea with the ease of a lifetime's dissembling, 'but Zyvan's death won't make a blind bit of difference. In the military we have this thing called the chain of command. The senior surviving officer will simply take over where he left off.' But he wouldn't have Zyvan's flair for leadership, and the unflinching confidence of the men under his command that the Lord General enjoyed. There was no doubt about it, if this heinous plan succeeded, we'd all be in deep trouble.

'We'll see,' Hanar said, gesturing with the barrel of the alien weapon she held. 'Now, if you'll both get out of those seats, and out of the pod, I'll be on my way.'

‘Stay where you are, Jurgen,’ I said, suddenly realising why we were both still alive. ‘She daren’t fire that thing in here, in case she fraks up the equipment.’

‘I’ll risk it if I have to,’ Hanar said, a trace of uncertainty cracking her imperturbable mask.

‘I doubt that,’ I said, allowing a measure of scorn to enter my voice. ‘I wonder how your comrades would feel if they knew their leader’s nothing more than a coward and a common thief.’

‘I’m nothing of the kind,’ Hanar said, her voice so tightly controlled that I could hear the anger behind it scrabbling to get out. ‘I’m quite an exceptional thief. And if those idiots are so keen to lay down their lives for the Greater Good, fine, they’re welcome to. I intend to be around afterwards to reap the benefits.’ She forced a mirthless laugh, which didn’t suit her at all. ‘Why shouldn’t I be well paid for my efforts? How much have you ever got from putting your life on the line, all those times you’ve been boring the parasites about ever since you came aboard?’

‘I get the standard pay specified by the Munitorum for a commissar of my seniority and length of service,’ I replied, uncomfortably aware of how much we seemed to have in common after all. ‘Plus accommodation and rations, when required.’ I smiled slowly, an idea beginning to form. It was risky, but if I didn’t do something soon, she’d kill both of us anyway. I gestured with my hand, up towards my head. ‘And the hat and the sash, of course. No commissar worth the name would be seen dead without those.’ I let my hand come to rest against the crimson cloth around my waist.

Hanar smiled vindictively, her mind made up at last. ‘Then this must be your lucky day,’ she said, her finger tightening on the trigger.

I fired first, the plasma bolt from the weapon I’d picked up earlier vaporising the front of my sash and scorching the legs of my trousers, before taking the traitorous adept high on the right side of her chest, searing away her shoulder and upper arm. She staggered back, shrieking, as her forearm and hand, still clutching the butt of the tau pistol, thudded to the deck plates.

‘Jurgen! Go!’ I shouted, relieved to see that she’d cleared the hatch, but my faithful aide had already punched the button on the arm of his chair. I just had time for one last glimpse of Hanar, lunging desperately for the pod again despite her appalling injuries, before the hatch clanged shut and the engine ignited, throwing us clear of the *Wavecrest* with a surge of

acceleration which almost made me feel grateful for the excessive padding of the seat.

‘What do we do now, sir?’ Jurgen asked, once we’d got the vox to work and reported the situation to Zyvan, who’d assured me that the matter would be dealt with.

‘Sit tight and enjoy the fireworks, I suppose,’ I said, as a small nova flared briefly among the starfield, the *Wavecrest* detonating far short of her intended target as the flagship’s crew made the most of the chance for some unexpected target practice. It would take a few hours for the pod’s machine-spirit to guide us home, and I fished the bottle of amasec out of my pocket speculatively. ‘I don’t suppose there are any glasses aboard this thing?’

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FOOTNOTES

1. *I'm pleased to hear it.*
2. *Almost a century by this point, although given the degree of vagueness about Cain's origins, and the amount of time he spent travelling the warp, that's more of a best guess than an accurate estimate. One thing we can be certain of from this description is that, like Cain, Hoy had benefited from a juvenat treatment or two.*
3. *Something of an exaggeration, but they'd certainly have made significant gains.*
4. *Cain's aide was a Valhallan and, like most iceworlders, found the temperatures most other Imperial citizens tend to favour sultry at best.*
5. *Seafood being a staple of the Deepwater diet, of course.*
6. *And the rest of his life, too, although by this point it was more habit than a serious attempt at seduction. I'd certainly have known if it wasn't.*
7. *Hardly the most flattering company to have been lumped in with.*
8. *A life form native to the Bannen system, most notable for its acidic blood, which is capable of eating through ceramite armour in a matter of seconds. Its eggs are full of the stuff, which makes handling them something of a risky business.*
9. *That depends on the individual of course: I tend towards safe disposal, but there are radicals out there unbalanced enough to actually use the things. Bad enough in my own ordo, but a truly terrifying prospect where the Malleus is concerned.*

10. A Valhallan fowl, proverbially too stupid and slow-moving to offer any challenge to a hunter.

11. Which Cain most certainly was, despite his frequent protestations to the contrary.

12. A question the Adeptus Mechanicus would very much like to have answered. A few magi have gone so far as to suggest that the machine-spirits of the Tau Empire might even be subverted and turned against their masters if they could somehow be persuaded that the servants of the Imperium would accord them the veneration they deserve, but so far no practical method of attempting the experiment has been proposed.

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CAIN'S LAST STAND

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Editorial Note:

I must confess to feeling a certain amount of relief in finally being able to present the latest extract from the Cain Archive to my fellow inquisitors for their perusal, this volume of his memoirs having turned out to be by far the most difficult editorial task I've tackled to date. Readers with sufficiently long memories may recall that in my preface to the third volume I mentioned the material therein had formed an extended digression in Cain's account of his activities during the Thirteenth Black Crusade; suffice it to say that it was far from being the only one, and several of these anecdotes were at least as long as his account of the Adumbria campaign. In part, I suspect, his inability to stick to the point for very long was because the events he was attempting to recount were still relatively recent, and he simply felt more comfortable recalling more distant, less immediately painful memories.

At the risk of sounding a trifle self-congratulatory, however, I think I've succeeded in patching together a reasonably coherent account of Cain's activities during the Second Siege of Perlia, with no more visible signs of editorial interference than usual. Whether or not it was worth the effort, I leave to your judgement.

Attentive readers who have been following this little hobby of mine for some while should realise at once that this volume links thematically with both of the immediately preceding ones, finally resolving a number of matters which began to unfold almost at the outset of his career. Even more importantly, the finished document gives us the closest thing we're ever likely to have to a reliable first-hand account of what may well have been a decisive blow against the Black Crusade itself. Which is not to diminish the

nobility and sacrifice of so many of the Emperor's faithful servants in those harsh and terrifying times; but if Cain is indeed accurate in his recollections (and despite his other faults, which he remains disarmingly candid about for the most part, he is at least consistent in reporting things pretty much as he experienced them), it can hardly be an exaggeration to suggest that had he not acted as he did, the Great Enemy would have had ultimate victory pretty much within their grasp. On the other hand, I can't quite shake the disquieting suspicion that the eventual consequences of the way matters were so unexpectedly resolved may turn out to be almost equally catastrophic. That particular shoe has still to drop, however, and at the very least Cain's resourcefulness has brought us additional time to prepare if the worst should come to pass.

But enough about my problems. Despite the considerable amount of work required to render it into a coherent form, I've been as scrupulous as ever in my attempts to remain as true as possible to both the spirit and the letter of Cain's reminiscences. Where necessary I have, as usual, added explanatory footnotes and material from other sources in order to provide a wider context to their author's perennially self-centred view of events; the rest is entirely Cain's own words.

Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos

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ONE

I can never see Perlia from orbit without experiencing a peculiar mixture of emotions. On the one hand, the memories of my first sight of that world, and the narrowness with which I escaped making no more of a mark on it than a small crater shortly thereafter, thanks to an orkish fighter pilot using my lifepod for target practice, come back with startling vividness every time I look down on it from outside the atmosphere. On the other, I've grown tolerably fond of the place in the last few years; after almost a century of rattling around the galaxy, in mortal peril more often than not, it's still a refreshing novelty to have somewhere to call home. Thus it was, as our shuttle shrugged off the last of the atmosphere on that fateful day early in the last year of the old millennium,¹ I found myself gazing out of the viewport in something of a pensive mood.

'Tea, commissar?' a familiar voice enquired at my elbow, and Jurgen's face appeared in the reflective armourcrys, occulting the soothing panorama of blue, green, and umber mottling the void beyond an instant after my nose had forewarned me that he'd begun to lean in my direction.

To say that the years had been kind to my aide would be something of an exaggeration; it would, perhaps, be more accurate to say that they were distantly polite to him, when they could be bothered to acknowledge his presence at all. What was left of his hair had turned white decades before, although most of it had long since abandoned his head completely, revealing a scalp as mottled with psoriasis as his face had always been in the patches visible between his ragged eruptions of facial hair.² He was still as vigorous as I was, though, thanks to the juvenat treatments Amberley had discreetly provided for him.

Despite the number of life-threatening errands I'd run for her over the

years, I was under no illusion about which of the two of us she regarded as the greater asset among her little stable of associates. Even heroes of the Imperium are two a credit compared to blanks, and having benefited from his inexplicable ability to nullify the powers of the warp on more occasions than I care to contemplate, I could well understand why she valued his assistance so highly.

‘Thank you, Jurgen,’ I said, accepting the mug of tanna he held out to me with surprising ease as, despite the confined space of the passenger compartment, my little knot of commissar cadets had chosen to sit as far away from the pair of us as they decently could. For that I could hardly blame them; my aide’s bouquet was pungent enough at the best of times, and his propensity to airsickness tended to exacerbate it even more than usual. ‘Most thoughtful.’

‘You’re welcome, sir.’ An expression somewhat approximating a smile appeared briefly on his face before wandering away again, and he replaced the cap on the flask carefully before stowing it somewhere among the profusion of webbing his torso armour was habitually festooned with. ‘I’ve got some sandwiches in here somewhere too, if you’d like one?’

‘The tea will be fine,’ I said hastily as he began to rummage through a couple of pouches, apparently at random. His relief at being outside the atmosphere at last was palpable, and I began to breathe a little less shallowly as I sipped the fragrant beverage, watching our adopted home world recede behind our reflected faces. I was beginning to show the weight of years myself, truth to tell, patches of white appearing at my own temples despite the periodic juvenats my seniority and supposedly heroic status had bestowed upon me. Well, I could hardly complain about that: after some of the things I’d seen and done it was a wonder the whole lot hadn’t turned to snow decades ago.

By this point I’d been living on Perlia for around six years, off and on, enjoying what was supposed to be a peaceful retirement. From time to time it actually had been. To my vague surprise I’d quite taken to the role of pedagogue, and the young pups I’d been put in charge of at the schola progenium someone had seen fit to found there since my last eventful visit³ were a great deal less troublesome than a Guard regiment. It probably didn’t hurt that I was the first instructor they’d had with a relatively lax attitude to the standards of discipline usually enforced in such institutions. I’d found very early on in my own career that a subtle approach was far more

effective in inspiring loyalty among the troops than simple intimidation, and it seemed to me that imparting this lesson by example would greatly increase their chances of future survival. (Not to mention the fact that it annoyed most of the Emperor-botherers who ran the place, which was always amusing from my point of view.)

Unfortunately, though, I hadn't been left to enjoy the relative tranquillity for long: the tyrannid hive fleets had chosen the year of my arrival to begin their onslaught against the Eastern Arm, and I'd been called back to the colours on several occasions since. Sometimes by the Commissariat, who seemed to believe that my presence too close to the firing line for comfort might make the scuttling horrors spit out the latest world they were attempting to devour, or at least make it unpleasantly indigestible, and almost as often by Amberley, who, like most of the Ordo Xenos in the Ultima Segmentum at the time, found her hands uncomfortably full, and seemed to find it necessary to delegate a good deal of the ensuing crisis management to those of us among her cadre of acolytes with a proven talent for survival.⁴

At any event, I'd been away from Perlia for quite some time when I returned home towards the end of 998, to find that quite a lot had been going on there in my absence. Luckily the main 'nid advance had bored on past the system, as I knew only too well, having been stuck right in its path, but it hadn't escaped entirely unscathed. A vanguard fleet had wandered in about eight months before, looking for an easy target to replenish their store of biomass, and our system defence squadrons had had their work cut out keeping them away from Perlia itself.

As it turned out they'd succeeded beyond all reasonable expectation, only a few warrior forms making it as far as the surface, and being swiftly dispatched by the PDF, but the price of victory had been a heavy one. All the outlying installations had been either overrun or abandoned to allow the fleet to concentrate on defending the planet itself; now the dust had settled, every void station and off-world habitat had to be cleansed of whatever chitinous horrors had gone to ground there before they could be got running again.

Which is why I found myself staring out of the viewport of the schola's battered old Aquila, which I strongly suspected only remained spaceworthy so the Navy cadets could get used to being void sick without inconveniencing the captains of the sector fleet, and the seminarians from

the Adeptus Mechanicus shrine adjoining our grounds had something to practice their rituals of maintenance on.

‘Time to rendezvous with the troop transport?’ I asked, turning in my seat to regard the double row of cadets, most of whom made a hurried attempt to look as though they’d been sitting upright and paying attention instead of playing regicide on their data-slates or swapping salacious holo-picts. The obvious exception was Cadet Nelys, who was already bolt upright, and wouldn’t know how to slouch if I ordered him to; Emperor’s teeth, I sometimes thought the lad slept at attention.

‘Seventeen minutes, commissar.’ A clear contralto, clipped and precise, cut through the sheepish murmur of wild guesses and mumbled excuses, a fraction of a second before Nelys could get his reply out, and he flushed, no doubt irritated at being beaten to the punch by the only girl in the squad.⁵

‘Well done, Kayla,’ I said, despite not having a clue whether she was right or not; she’d put Nelys’s nose out of joint, which was good enough for me. The lad had all the makings of an ideal commissar: pious, zealous, and apparently convinced that a sense of humour was something which only happened to other people. Which is the main reason I’d made it my mission in life to get him to lighten up a little before he graduated; with an attitude like that he was a friendly fire accident just waiting to happen as soon as he got assigned to a real regiment.

‘Commissar,’ Cadet Kayla acknowledged curtly, her cap wobbling slightly over the pad of glossy brown hair she’d stuffed under it. Her refusal to adopt the short crop of her fellow cadets was the one sign of femininity I’d so far seen her allow herself. Apart from that, she was almost as relentless as Nelys, although I strongly suspected that this was more because she felt the need to justify her presence in an otherwise all-male environment. Emperor knows, it can’t have been easy for her; but she was more than making her mark. If I’m honest, I thought she was one of the most promising of the bunch, and would probably go far once she’d developed a little more confidence in her own judgement.

Which was the opposite of my concern about the lad sitting next to her. Donal worried me, although I couldn’t have said why, exactly; not truthfully, anyway. His assessments were all satisfactory, and his combat skills a little above the average. He was bright, too, of that I had no doubt, although not as perceptive as Kayla, and had the rare ability to think on his feet and take immediate advantage of any unexpected circumstance that

came up. The plain fact was he reminded me of myself at that age, which meant that although I had no clearly discernable grounds for disquiet, I never felt entirely able to trust him.

He must have noticed my eyes resting on him for a moment, because he nodded at me with every outward sign of respect. 'Will you be going in with us yourself, sir?'

'Well, I had been planning to sit here with my feet up sipping tea,' I said, inflecting it like a joke, and everyone laughed dutifully except Nelys, who just looked confused. Fat chance of that now, though, and I couldn't help wondering if Donal had spoken up on purpose, intending to undermine my authority if I appeared to be shirking, which is precisely the sort of thing I used to pull on my own tutors. 'But if you feel you need your hand held, I'll tag along.'

'Thank you, sir,' he said. 'I'm sure we all feel better knowing you're watching our backs.' As usual, there was no overt trace of sarcasm in his voice, though I found myself searching for it nevertheless.

'If you'll all get your slates out, you'll find a schematic of the objective,' I said. What the hell, I had their attention now, so I might as well get on with the briefing. 'Asteroid 761 kappa. A mining hab we reclaimed from the bugs six months ago.'

'Then why are we going back?' Kayla asked.

Precisely my own question of three days before, as it happened, so I nodded judiciously.

'Good question. Unfortunately we won't know the answer until we get there. All we know at this stage is that the Administratum reported losing contact with the miners about a week ago, and requested the SDF to take a look. They haven't got the manpower aboard a system defence boat to muster a boarding party large enough, so they requested some backup from the PDF, who thoughtfully provided a platoon of funks⁶ just out of basic. Which means they'll be jumpy, especially if it turns out the first sweep missed a few 'nids, and they've been snacking on the civvies. Which means in turn that you get some much-needed field experience.' Herding a bunch of PDF trolls shouldn't be all that taxing, and would be the perfect opportunity to see how well my cadets were able to perform away from the schola. 'Any questions?'

'How are we going to be deployed?' Kayla asked. She looked at the schematic of the mine again. 'Those tunnels seem far too narrow for any

large concentration of troops.'

'Quite right, they are,' I agreed, my lifelong affinity for environments like that enabling me to picture them all too easily. 'The PDF will be splitting up into squads, and sweeping a sector each. That means a pair of you will be going in with each one. If your assigned squad splits down into fireteams, you'll have to decide for yourselves who goes with which.'

'That seems clear enough,' she agreed, looking thoughtful.

'I'm glad you think so,' I said. 'Any more questions?'

'Sir,' Nelys said. 'Are we to infer that we have full commissarial authority on this assignment?'

'Up to a point,' I said, with a distinct sinking feeling. 'You're there to encourage the troopers you're attached to, in any manner you see fit. But that doesn't mean you can execute anybody without asking me first, is that clear?' That would be all I needed, some over-zealous cadet landing me with a mountain of paperwork.

'Yes, sir,' Nelys said, looking faintly disappointed, and the others all nodded too.

'Good.' I resumed my seat, not entirely sure whether I was pleased or not that the attitude of our shuttle had changed during my brief talk with the cadets, and that Perlia was no longer visible through the viewport as our pilot boosted us further out into deep space. Instead, the stars were staring in at me, sharp pinpricks of light speckling the void like the dandruff on Jurgen's collar, and I found myself trying to spot the one that was moving; that would be the transport vessel we were rendezvousing with.

After a few moments of minor tedium it swam into view, resolving itself over the next ten minutes or so into a battered intra-system cargo hauler. Having had my first sight of it, I didn't envy the PDF squaddies, no doubt jammed into a hold more suited to chunks of ore than passengers.

'We've taken up formation,' our pilot's voice informed me through the comm-bead in my ear. 'Estimated time of arrival at the objective seven hours, thirty-two minutes.'

'Thank you,' I said, reclining the seat as far as it would go. Before settling, I glanced back at the cadets. 'I'd recommend catching some sleep. There's no telling how much you'll get later, if we do turn out to be heading into a combat zone.' Or how much any of us were likely to get now, since Jurgen, a seasoned campaigner if ever there was one, had pre-empted my advice, and was already snoring loudly enough to intimidate an ork.

Nevertheless, I managed to doze off reasonably quickly; certainly far more rapidly than I would have done if I'd had any idea of what was waiting for us on the nameless rock tumbling through the void ahead, let alone the nightmare that was already poised to sweep across the galaxy, engulfing us along with everybody else.

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Editorial Note:

In the light of later developments, and Cain's perennial tendency to skip over everything that didn't affect him personally, this seems like a good point at which to insert a brief note about the asteroid which he and his charges had been sent to reconnoitre. It comes from the Concise Compendium Of Extraplanetary Resources, a two hundred and thirty-seven thousand page document maintained by the Perlian Bureau of Tithes, Mineralogical Assessment and Fisheries, and is, unfortunately, as dry as most Administratum documents of that type. It does, however, point out one characteristic of the rock in question which, in the light of later events, is almost certainly highly significant: the italics highlighting this are, of course, mine.

Asteroid 761 kappa: approximate dimensions 4.75 kilometres by 1.39.

Primary extractable: ferrous metals.

Secondary extractables: silicates, volatiles.

Mining station established 887. M41: reclaimed from orks 923 M41, reclaimed from tyrannids 998. M41, 999. M41.

Other remarks: *Orbital path trailing Perlia by constant 2 degrees at equal distance from primary.*



TWO

I can't say for certain how the cadets fared, but certainly I managed to get a reasonable amount of sleep myself as we drifted closer to our objective. When I woke at last, roused by the mingled aromas of tanna and Jurgen's halitosis, the asteroid was visible just beyond the viewport, resembling nothing so much as a diseased tuber, grey in colour, and roughly twice as long as it was thick around its widest point.

'Breakfast, sir?' my aide enquired, proffering another mug of the fragrant beverage, which I took with enthusiasm, and a standard-issue ration bar, which I accepted with rather less alacrity. 'Sorry it's a bit basic, but they haven't got a galley I can use.'

'This will do fine,' I assured him insincerely, chewing the pulpy mass, which, as usual, tasted of nothing either particularly identifiable or particularly palatable. At least the tanna was as invigorating as ever, washing the peculiar absence of flavour from my mouth as I finished the bar.

Jurgen slurped at his own drink. 'Maybe I can find a kitchen or something when we dock.'

'Let's hope that's the most pressing matter on our minds,' I said, mindful of the reason for our little expedition. To my complete lack of surprise none of the miners had resumed contact while I'd been asleep, and the palms of my hands began to itch in the disconcerting fashion which usually forewarned me of trouble to come. I turned to the gaggle of cadets, who, for the most part, were snacking lightly on their own ration bars, or ignoring them altogether. A few were looking distinctly queasy, which was hardly surprising given that they could find themselves in action against a genuine enemy for the first time in their lives within the hour. 'Everyone ready?'

‘Yes, sir.’ The chorus of assent was distinctly half-hearted, apart from Nelys, who looked as if he couldn’t wait to get started, and Kayla, who still seemed to think she had something to prove. Donal didn’t say anything, but nodded, with an easy insouciance, which left me distinctly uneasy.

‘Glad to hear it,’ I said, pretending not to notice the desultory nature of the response. ‘Because I’m terrified.’

‘Sir?’ Nelys looked puzzled, as he always did when someone cracked a joke (or in this instance pretended to), but I was pleased to see a few wan smiles appearing on the faces of most of my charges.

‘Well,’ I said easily, ‘perhaps terrified is overstating it a little.’ (Though not as much as they thought, of course.) A few of them nodded gravely, as if they understood. ‘But I don’t mind admitting that I’ve got a bad feeling about this.’

‘But you’re a hero of the Imperium,’ Kayla said, an element of surprise creeping into her voice. ‘You’ve been in action hundreds of times. Why should this one be any different?’

‘Who said it was?’ I asked. I turned to the viewport behind me. ‘I haven’t a clue what’s waiting for us on that rock over there,’ I said, pointing to the asteroid, which had grown astonishingly large in the few minutes my back had been turned. Deeply shadowed cracks and fissures mottled its surface now, along with an indeterminate number of hummocks and ridges, interspersed with occasional man-made protrusions, which could have been anything from auspex arrays to washing lines for all I knew. ‘But I do know that as soon as we dock we’re going to have to convince the troopers that whatever it is, we can beat it.’ I pointed to the troopship, which dwarfed the shuttle we were in, occulting part of the asteroid like a metal echo of the drifting rock beyond. ‘And to do that, you have to allow yourself to feel a little of what they do.’ The girl nodded, along with Donal and a couple of the others.

Only Nelys seemed not to get it. ‘So what you’re saying is,’ he said slowly, ‘that to lead cowards we have to behave like cowards ourselves?’

‘Of course not,’ I said, trying to disguise my irritation at his obtuseness. From the expression on Kayla and Donal’s faces, I suspected that I hadn’t altogether succeeded. ‘But caution and cowardice aren’t the same thing at all. That fear is your friend; it sharpens your reactions, and it keeps you alive. Without it you’ll take needless risks, putting your own life in danger along with the soldiers you’re serving with. Casualties are inevitable on the

battlefield, but we serve the Emperor best by making sure that the majority of them are the enemy's, not ours. Every Imperial soldier killed by a bad call from us, or their own commanders, is a blow against our armies, and against the Golden Throne itself.'

There was an awestruck silence for a moment, and I began to wonder if perhaps I'd overdone it. But Nelys was nodding slowly. 'That makes sense,' he said.

'I'm glad you agree,' I said, feeling it was time to lighten the mood. I smiled at the cadets. 'I'm afraid our job isn't easy. There's a lot more to it than a sash and a fancy hat. But you're here because you're the best and the brightest that the Imperium has to offer. If the responsibility feels heavy at times, then it should. But it's a burden I hope you'll be proud to shoulder when the time comes.'

And, just like that, I had them. After almost a century of trotting out morale-boosting platitudes for all occasions I could have done it in my sleep. Trying not to wonder how many of them would make it back to the shuttle once we were done here, I turned from the dozen eager faces in front of me to stare out of the viewport again. By now we were drifting gently towards an open pair of thick iron gates set into the rocky surface of the asteroid, through which light was spilling, sparking highlights from the rim of the portal and what I could see of the Aquila's fuselage.

A moment later the view through the armourcrys altered abruptly from the cold, hard stars of open space and the looming bulk of the commandeered freighter accompanying us to a rough-hewn cavern about the size of a scrumball pitch. Luminators dangled from the ceiling, almost twenty metres above the more-or-less level floor, which, like the walls themselves, looked as though it had been hacked straight from the rock with mining tools as quickly as possible.

A couple of utility shuttles from which a variety of tools protruded, mounted on flexible metal tubes which strongly resembled the mechadendrites often sported by tech-priests, were parked on launch cradles in one corner; no doubt they were intended to service the surface-mounted ironmongery I'd noticed on the way in, although judging by the number of wires and prayer scrolls spilling from the open inspection hatches these were in no fit state to leave their makeshift hangar. As our pilot brought us gently to rest next to them, and the doors behind us began to close, I found myself staring at the tiny spacecraft next to our own with a

sense of foreboding: I'd never known a cogboy⁷ leave a job half-finished, at least not voluntarily, and if whatever rites of maintenance had been underway here had been interrupted, the chances were it had been by nothing good. The palms of my hands began to itch in earnest.

'We're down, sir,' Jurgen reported unnecessarily, as the whine of our engines died away, and the narrow door to the cockpit banged open, just missing my knees.

A redheaded youth in the uniform of a naval cadet popped out of it as abruptly as one of the figures on the ridiculous ornamental clock in Liberation Square,⁸ and saluted in my general direction. The name tape on the left breast of his flight suit read 'Sprie,' presumably in case he forgot who he was, and the unit patch on his upper arm showed the entwined crests of the sector fleet and the schola progenium, to make sure he remembered where he lived, and which branch of the service he was in training for. 'Any further instructions, sir?' he asked.

'Yes.' I thought rapidly. 'Take off again as soon as we're clear, and loiter just outside the main airlock.'

'Understood.' He saluted again, and popped back inside the narrow flight deck, allowing me to see the brace of cadets manning the other lecterns, and the instructor overseeing the pack of them. I had a lot of time for Hubert Visiter, the grey-haired commodore in charge of the naval cadets, and was far less surprised to find him along for the ride than I would have done most of our colleagues among the faculty.

'Expectin' trouble, Cain?' he asked, without preamble, his neatly clipped moustache vibrating on his upper lip.

'Always,' I replied, truthfully enough. 'And if it gets this close, I want to make sure you're still around to pick us up.' Well, me, anyway, and Jurgen if possible. As for the rest, it was Horus take the hindmost so far as I was concerned.

'It'll take about three minutes to re-pressurise the cavern once we're back inside,' Sprie volunteered, earning an approving nod from his instructor. 'That's a long time if you need a quick dust-off.' I began to warm to the lad as well at that point; in my experience it's always a good sign when the pilot's thinking about the fastest way to extract you if it all goes ploid-shaped.

'Good point,' Visiter agreed. 'Do you think you'll be able to hold that long on the other side of the pressure door if you have to?'

‘We shouldn’t have to,’ I countered. ‘If we need to make a run for it that badly we’ll head straight for the freighter. You can take us off from one of their personnel locks if necessary.’

‘That could work,’ Visiter conceded. The makeshift troopship was far too large to dock internally, and, according to the vox-chatter in my comm-bead, which I was listening to with a small corner of my mind out of long habit, had just made a hard seal with one of the cargo locks on the next level.

‘Then we’ll be seeing you when we want a ride home,’ I concluded.

Something went *ping!* inside the cockpit, and a rune on one of the lecterns turned green. ‘The cavern’s pressurised,’ a female cadet informed us.

‘Then let’s go,’ I said, turning to my motley collection of would-be commissars. They certainly looked the part, although they hadn’t got their sashes yet, of course;⁹ on the other hand, after much internal debate, I’d decided to issue them with a sidearm and a chainsword apiece. If we really were about to start playing hunt the ‘nid in a labyrinth of narrow passageways, sending them in unarmed would be tantamount to a death sentence. Most of them were at least familiar enough with the weapons not to shoot themselves in the foot or lop their own heads off (with the possible exception of young Stebbins, who was the worst shot with a laspistol I’d ever encountered, and considering the number of gretchin and Chaos cultists who’ve taken a pot at me over the years, that’s really saying something).

‘Yes sir!’ This time the chorus of assent sounded a little more robust, so drawing my laspistol and loosening my trusty chainsword in its scabbard (I’ve always found a dramatic gesture goes down well at a time like this), I led the way towards the exit ramp.

‘At least the gravity’s still on,’ Jurgen remarked as we disembarked, glancing around suspiciously, the melta he insisted on carrying whenever we were expecting serious trouble a reassuring presence in his hands.

‘That’s something,’ I agreed, getting the measure of our surroundings. Despite the suffocating sense of imminent danger, there was something almost homelike about it, and for a moment I wondered at that, before realising that the warren of tunnels we’d found ourselves in wasn’t very different from pretty much any underhive you care to point at.¹⁰ My bootsoles crunched on the gritty surface as I left the boarding ramp, the harsh scent of mineral dust tickling my nostrils for a moment before

Jurgen's earthier bouquet nudged it out of the way. 'Doing this in free fall wouldn't have been much fun at all.'

'It's hardly going to be a stroll round the gardens as it is,' Donal remarked, checking the power pack of his laspistol before stowing it back in its holster. More or less convinced that a pack of slaving hormagaunts wasn't about to leap out from behind the eviscerated shuttles, I followed suit. No point alarming the PDF troops by waving weapons in their direction, at least unless I had to.

'No, it's not,' I agreed levelly. 'I've fought 'nids before, and the best piece of advice I can give you is never underestimate them. They might seem like mindless animals, and individually they are, but the intelligence directing them is anything but.'

'I'll bear that in mind,' Donal told me, looking far too confident for my liking. No point in fretting about it, though, so I led the way towards the thick airtight door set into the cavern wall a score or so metres away. It squealed on its hinges as Nelys shouldered it open and disappeared through it; no screaming ensued, and his head didn't bounce back at us, so I concluded it was safe to proceed.

The chamber beyond was pretty much what I was expecting, and once Stebbins and Frister, the last two cadets to follow us through, had dogged the door closed again to allow the shuttle to depart, I paused for a moment to glance at the schematic of the station displayed on the screen of my data-slate.

The internal layout was just as much of a jumbled mess as I remembered from my previous looks at it, the tangle of passageways wandering through the rock apparently at random, their direction dictated more by the presence of something extractable than any overall plan. Here and there larger chambers marked the points where significant deposits of something or other had been gouged out, several of them since converted into utility areas of one sort or another, while others had simply been abandoned, showing as nothing more than the nodes from which more questing corridors had been drilled.

This, judging by a quick visual inspection, had been one of the latter. We stood in a wide rocky chamber, its rough walls pitted with shaft entrances, and its undulating floor bare apart from a few scattered pieces of mining equipment I didn't recognise. Portable luminators had been erected close to the door we'd entered the cavern by, and also by a similar door in the far

wall, the cables trailing from both disappearing up one of the tunnels in between, but apart from that there wasn't a clue which way to go. After a moment, though, I slipped the slate back into my greatcoat pocket, grateful for the insulation the thick garment afforded me against the clammy chill in the air, confident that my innate affinity for environments like this had kicked in, and that I'd be able to find my way back here if I needed to.

'Which way, sir?' Stebbins asked diffidently, no doubt wondering if I was going to put him on point, although his marksmanship was so bad, being behind him would hardly be any safer than in front if we got into a firefight. (Not that tyranids use firearms, of course, but the ranged weapons they do have at their disposal are no less lethal, not to say considerably more revolting.)

'A good question,' I said, feeling that the familiar routine of instruction would allay their nervousness, at least for a while. 'Anyone got an answer?'

'Through there,' Nelys said, pointing to the doorway in the opposite wall. 'Where else?'

'We could follow the cables,' Kayla suggested. 'They must lead to a hab area.'

Donal shrugged. 'At least that way's lit,' he pointed out. Which was true. Most of the other tunnels were dark and uninviting, and I tried not to read the stealthy footfalls of a lictor into every stray sound echoing through the chamber. If there really were 'nids here, it was credits to carrots they'd be lurking in the unlit passageways, and I wasn't about to venture down any of those without a squad or two of the PDF in front of me to find any unpleasant surprises first.

'Well done, Donal,' I said. 'You too, Kayla. That service passage connects with the external docking ports, where the troopers we're here to supervise are currently disembarking.' At least it did if the map in my data-slate could be trusted, which was by no means certain; these mining habs had an unnerving tendency to change their internal layout faster than a noblewoman's wardrobe. Fortunately it turned out to be reliable in this instance, as my internal compass had already assured me, and within a few moments we were making our way up a gradual slope towards the unmistakable sound of a lot of people jammed into a confined space and not at all happy about it.

'This way,' Donal said decisively, leading the way down a cross corridor we'd come to after a minute or two of climbing, and I found it hard to

disagree. There were more cables here, and electrocones attached to the walls at regular intervals, not to mention more of the metal doorways set into the rock: clearly we were entering one of the more frequently-used utility zones. Frequently used when the three hundred or so miners we'd come here to look for were going about their normal business, that was, and the sudden reminder of their absence set my palms tingling again. Almost without realising it, my hands fell to the weapons on my belt.

The cavern we entered was the largest we'd come to yet, which was just as well, as the PDF had done us proud: they'd promised a full platoon, and that's what we got, five full squads and a command team, supplemented by a gaggle of heavy support troopers apparently attached at command level. They were forming up reasonably efficiently as we arrived, and I made a quick mental note of which of the ubiquitous metal doors led to the docking port, and the mineral barge beyond: a reasonably easy deduction, as the portal had been left open, and the dingy metal walls of a cargo airlock were clearly visible on the other side, their angular metal a stark and unmistakable contrast to the unfinished rock surrounding us.

'Commissar.' The young officer leading the rabble trotted across to me, his vox-operator at his shoulder, and a trio of hard-faced troopers double-timing it behind, their lasguns already held ready for use. I'd have felt a lot happier with proper Guardsmen on the job, of course, but I have to admit that the Perlian PDF weren't too bad for a local militia; they'd learned a lot the hard way from the orkish invasion less than a century ago, and were determined to make sure the greenskins wouldn't get a second chance if they ever turned up again. (Which the occasional warband did from time to time, of course, as they so often do on worlds once sullied by their presence, despite the campaign to eradicate them apparently having been completely successful at the time.)¹¹ As a result they were more battle-ready than most PDFs in the sector, a fact I suspected a good many of them had come to regret in the last few years, as they'd been comprehensively tithed for the Guard in order to make up the losses caused by the first onslaught of the tyrannid assault. 'Lieutenant Vorlens, officer commanding.'

'Lieutenant.' I returned the salute, trying to get a reasonable picture of the man as I did so. He was young, like most of the troopers surrounding us, but he seemed clear and decisive enough despite his inexperience. At least he didn't gawp at me, like most Perlians catching sight of me for the first time tended to do, so it appeared he was capable of keeping his mind on the

job, which was an encouraging sign. If the best of the PDF had been sent off to fight the hive fleets (or, more likely, end up as fodder for them), Vorlens at least seemed like one of the best of the rest. Which, under the circumstances, was probably the best I could hope for. ‘You have a battle plan?’

‘Not much of one,’ he admitted, which, paradoxically, I found distinctly encouraging; overconfidence kills more soldiers than las-bolts do. ‘Anything complicated would just fall apart in a place like this anyway.’

‘You’re right about that,’ I agreed, to the young officer’s manifest surprise and relief. ‘I’ve been on sweeps like this before, and any kind of large-scale deployment is right out.’

‘That’s just what I thought,’ Vorlens said. He produced a data-slate of his own, and brought up a copy of the map I’d been looking at a few moments before. ‘So I’m dividing the platoon up into squads, and assigning them each a sector, fanning out from here along the main access tunnels.’ Several of the principal corridors turned blue, indicating the main line of the planned advance. ‘As they reach the side passages they can detach a fireteam to reconnoitre along them, while the other half of the squad remains at the junction to cover their backs.’¹² He glanced sideways at me, clearly prepared for my disapproval, and hoping I wouldn’t overrule the unorthodox tactic.

‘Just what I’d do,’ I assured him. I turned to the cadets behind me. ‘You’ll be assigned as we discussed in the shuttle. One per fireteam.’ I noticed a hand twitching, before the impulse to raise it was suppressed. Good. They might not be fully-fledged commissars yet, but drawing attention to the fact would hardly help morale. ‘Kayla, you have a question?’

‘Yes, commissar.’ Vorlens blinked, suddenly registering the fact of her gender. ‘Two of us per squad leaves two over. What will they be doing?’

‘Well, someone needs to keep an eye on the heavy weapons teams,’ I said. I glanced at Vorlens. ‘I assume you have some idea of how you want to deploy them?’ Two sets of autocannon crews were setting up their weapon mounts as we spoke, flanking the doorway leading to the airlock and the docked freighter beyond, and the young lieutenant nodded.

‘Right here,’ he said. ‘They can’t lug that kit around in the main tunnel complex without getting in everyone’s way.’ Picturing the clumsy heavy weapons in such a confined space, I certainly couldn’t argue with that. ‘And that rust bucket’s our only way off this rock. If there really are tyranids

running around loose up here, I want it defended.'

'Me too,' I agreed. I picked a cadet at random. 'Garvie, that's your assignment.'

'Yes, sir,' he replied, looking both serious and resigned, and I favoured him with a smile.

'Don't think you're missing out on the fun,' I assured him. 'If the 'nids realise how vital this chamber is, you'll see plenty of action.' Garvie nodded again, his face set, and trotted off to get in the way of the gunners guarding the airlock.

'You think they're definitely here, then?' Vorlens asked.

'I'd put money on it,' I said. 'Three hundred miners don't just vanish.' For a moment a chill fragment of memory flitted across my synapses, and I shuddered at the recollection of a similar conversation some seventy years earlier. I'd gone looking for a few missing miners on Simia Orichalcae, and ended up blundering into a necron tomb, managing to survive only by the narrowest of margins and a ridiculous amount of luck. Recalling myself to the present with an effort, I chided myself for allowing the thought to spook me. Compared to the necrons, even the prospect of facing a genestealer brood seemed positively welcome.

'Then where are they?' Donal asked, looking around with a faintly theatrical air.

'You'll see them soon enough,' I assured him, more presciently than I knew, and returned my attention to Vorlens. 'They're stealthy. They'll hide in the shadows, and they'll attack on sight. Your men should keep their luminators on at all times, and check every nook and cranny they come across. Even ones which seem far too small to hide in; believe me, they can squeeze in anywhere.'

'Thanks for the advice,' the young lieutenant said. 'Anything else we should bear in mind?'

'Yes.' I nodded. 'Keep an eye on the ceilings, too. Some of them can cling on up there, and drop on you when you're passing.' I glanced at Nelys, whose expression was one of incredulous disbelief, and felt a flare of irritation in response. 'I've seen them take out an entire squad of Astartes that way.' No point mentioning that the luckless Space Marines in question had been wearing Terminator armour, and the genestealer swarm had ripped them apart regardless; the troops surrounding us were keyed up enough already, without me scaring them half to death before we even got started.

‘Your best tactic is to make sure you’ve got clear firelanes, and as much distance as possible between you and any possible concealment. They’ll bunch up nice and tightly in these narrow tunnels, and they generally charge in a swarm, so you should be able to gun most of them down before they get close enough to do any harm.’ Assuming we weren’t facing ’nids with ranged weapons, of course, and even then most close-combat forms were hellishly fast and agile, but it wouldn’t be tactful to mention that either, so I didn’t. The troopers around us, who were all conspicuously failing to look as though they weren’t listening avidly to the conversation, were at least starting to take heart from my carefully-phrased pose of confidence, so it looked as if we were about as ready as we were ever going to get.

‘Then we may as well get started,’ Vorlens said, gesturing to his vox man. ‘Move them out, following the assigned routes.’ He glanced in my direction. ‘As soon as you’ve got your people deployed, of course.’

‘Of course,’ I said, pleased to note that he’d fallen quite naturally into the ideal relationship between soldier and commissar; he was prepared to listen to any advice I had to offer, and make use of any he felt valuable, but wasn’t going to let my presence undermine his own authority with the troopers under his command. Quite right too; we were there to boost morale, not give orders.¹³ I just hoped Nelys would realise that, and stay on the right side of the line.

Well, that, at least, I could do something about. I beckoned him over. ‘Nelys,’ I said, ‘you take First Squad. Liaise with the platoon sergeant.’ I had no doubt that the most senior NCO present would be more than capable of reining him in if he got too cocky; in my experience they didn’t get to that position by suffering fools gladly. And just in case that wasn’t enough... ‘Kayla, go with him.’ She had enough common sense for the pair of them, I hoped.

‘Commissar.’ She gave me a thanks-for-nothing look as she saluted, no doubt divining my purpose in pairing them off, which fortunately Nelys missed, being too busy preening at being assigned to what he no doubt thought was a prime position. The two of them peeled off to join their squad, which promptly moved out of the cavern, their feet raising echoes from the enclosed walls of the tunnel they were searching. I was pleased to note that the soldiers comprising it were covering each other even at this stage, taking nothing for granted, and began to feel a little easier about the assignment. Vorlens’ boys might have been wet behind the ears, but they’d

clearly been paying attention in basic training.

‘Stebbins, Frister, you’ve got Second Squad,’ I said. The two of them were friends, and worked reasonably well together. ‘Maklin and Dallory, you take Third. Heskin and Klarch, Fourth. Tilar and Briel, Fifth.’ One by one, the remaining squads, reinforced by the pairs of commissar cadets, moved out, until only Jurgen, myself, and the command team was left. And Donal, of course. I turned to him. ‘You’re with the lieutenant,’ I told him, unnecessarily.

‘I’m flattered by your confidence in me,’ he replied, which was uncomfortably close to the sort of answer I would have given at his age, and which confirmed my judgement in not letting him out of my sight. He turned to Vorlens. ‘Are you intending to monitor the operation from here?’

‘No.’ To my well-concealed horror, the young lieutenant was shaking his head. Up until then I’d been taking it for granted that staying put and co-ordinating the sweep a stone’s throw from the safety of the airlock had been part of his plan; it certainly would have been in any of the Guard regiments I’d served with. But of course there wasn’t a nice cosy command Chimera to sit in here, full of vox gear and auspex arrays to make that work; just a data-slate and his vox-operator. In fact I was probably more on top of things myself, thanks to the network of comm-beads linking me to Jurgen and the cadets. ‘We’ll be pushing on to the main habitation area. If there are any survivors, that’s where we’re most likely to find them.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ Donal said, drawing his laspistol, and glancing in my direction. ‘Will you be accompanying us, commissar?’

‘Of course,’ I said, drawing my own. As usual, my completely undeserved reputation for extravagant heroics was about to drag me into mortal danger, and there wasn’t a thing I could do to back out of it without fatally undermining my authority with the cadets.

‘Then, if you’re ready,’ Vorlens said, ‘let’s go hunt some ’nids.’



THREE

I don't know if Vorlens ever realised how ironic his words were but I was all too aware, as we set off into the labyrinth of tunnels, that if there was any hunting to be done, it was going to be done by the tyranids. I'd been in similar situations to this far too many times to count, and none of them had ended well, beyond the faintly surprising fact of my continued survival. At least we were heading along one of the primary access tunnels, which was relatively wide and brightly lit, so we'd have plenty of warning of any lurking organisms up ahead. Or so I hoped.

'Sector twelve clear,' Stebbins reported, his voice a little attenuated in my comm-bead by scores of metres of intervening rock, a moment before Vorlens's vox man began to relay an identical report from the sergeant in charge of Second Squad. 'Moving on to sixteen.'

'Acknowledged,' I said, keeping my voice steady with an effort. None of the other teams had found anything yet either, and the longer we went without contacting the enemy the less I liked it. Which, if you've read much of these ramblings of mine, will probably surprise you but I don't mind admitting I was getting thoroughly spooked by this time. I was all too aware that to have taken out over three hundred people before someone managed to get to a vox and yell for help would have required a significant number of attackers, so we should have stumbled across a few of them by now. The fact that we hadn't meant that they were probably concentrated somewhere up ahead, perhaps even waiting in ambush, which was far from a comforting reflection.

'Perhaps they're dormant again,' Jurgen suggested. 'Like the nest we found on Utoxita.'

'That's possible,' I said, hoping he was right, but privately doubting that

we'd be that lucky. I turned to Vorlens. 'If they are, they'll be concentrated in a cavern somewhere, digesting what's left of the miners and waiting for dessert to turn up.'

'How big a cavern?' Donal asked, taking out his data-slate.

I shrugged. 'That depends on how many there are. My guess would be somewhere between thirty and sixty, but with 'nids you can never be sure of anything.'

'That's a lot of tyrannids,' Vorlens said. 'How could that many stay hidden for so long?' He looked dubious. 'One or two might have been able to evade the search teams, but I don't see how a swarm that size could possibly have managed it.'

'The fighting to cleanse this place was pretty intense,' Donal said, showing that he'd at least skimmed through the briefing materials at some point on the shuttle trip, or wanted me to think that he had. 'If one of the galleries collapsed, I suppose an entire brood might have been overlooked behind the rockfall.'

'Just waiting for some frothead to come along and dig them out,' Vorlens said. He glanced at me, briefly, before returning his attention to the shadows between the luminators spaced along the tunnel. 'When we get to the main administration section we can look for a work schedule. That ought to tell us if anyone's reopened a sealed-off shaft recently.'

'Good idea,' I responded, taking a slightly tighter grip on the butt of my laspistol. My palms were itching again, and I couldn't account for it consciously, but something about the corridor up ahead seemed subtly wrong. Then it struck me. All the doors we'd passed so far had been closed, delaying us for several minutes while we checked a plethora of storerooms and side shafts, most of them dead ends, before resuming our march towards the heart of this tumbling death trap; but the portal a dozen or so metres ahead of us was ajar. I felt the hairs on the back of my neck begin to bristle, and dropped back a pace or two, ensuring that Vorlens and a couple of his troopers were ahead of me.

'There are two hundred and seven caverns large enough to hold a swarm of the size you suggested,' Donal said, glancing up from his data-slate. 'None of them are recorded as having been sealed off, but this is an old map...' His voice trailed away, and he stowed the slate hastily in a pocket of his greatcoat. 'What's wrong?'

'That doorway,' I said, drawing my chainsword, and indicating the portal

ahead of us. To his credit, the lad was quick on the uptake; he drew his own weapons at once. Vorlens gestured to his troopers with the barrel of his laspistol, and two of them took up position on either side of the hinged metal slab, while the third covered it with his lasgun. That left the rest of us hanging back a little, which was fine by me, although I must confess to glancing up and down the echoing tunnel, straining my ears for the telltale skittering of claws on rock that would warn us of the approach of a pack of gaunts.

‘On three,’ Vorlens said, raising his hand to count down by folding one finger at a time into his clenched fist. As the last digit disappeared, one of the troopers kicked the door open, and the other dived through the gap, his lasgun ready, just the way they must have rehearsed it in basic training.¹⁴ A moment later his two squad mates followed.

‘Clear!’ one of the troopers called, and the rest of us filed in after them, apart from Jurgen, who continued to hover just outside, keeping an eye on the tunnel in case we were being outflanked. Just as well, really, as the melta would have been as dangerous to us as to the enemy in such a confined space, and the prolonged tension hadn’t been doing a lot for his personal freshness either.

Like the rest of the rooms we’d checked so far on our erratic progress towards the heart of the asteroid, the chamber had been hacked out of the rock with scant regard for regularity of line or smoothness of finish. It was evidently used for storage, as a series of metal shelving units had been erected, dividing the space into narrow lanes just wide enough to walk along, stacked for most of their length with boxes, on which serial numbers which meant nothing to me had been scrawled in penstick.

‘Rock samples,’ Donal said, peering into the nearest, and extracting a lump of something which looked like quartz. As he rattled it back into place, I held up my hand for silence.

‘Quiet!’ I said, straining my ears. Something about the echoes sounded wrong, unmistakably so to anyone familiar with the ambient sounds of the underhive, and I turned my head, trying to pinpoint the source of the anomaly. ‘There’s another way in here!’

‘There can’t be.’ Donal had returned his weapons to his belt by now, and was messing about with the data-slate again. ‘This is just a room. See, it’s quite clearly marked as having only one door.’

‘Then the map’s wrong!’ I snapped, heading down a narrow aisle between

two of the metal shelves. Right then I'd have given just about anything to step back through the door and seal it, but I knew from long and bitter experience that what you didn't know could kill you in situations like this. One quick look, I thought, just enough to let me know what we were facing, that was all. At least Vorlens was quick on the uptake; as I started to move, he gestured to a couple of the troopers accompanying us, and they began to flank me, a couple of paces behind, intermittently visible between the racked boxes on the intervening shelves.

Something scraped against rock, a few metres ahead of me, but I couldn't see it, and wished I'd taken my own advice about carrying a luminator. The luxplates set into the ceiling cast too many conflicting shadows for my liking, the labyrinth of boxed rocks scattering their illumination, and crazing it with too many pockets of darkness where anything might be lurking. I strained my ears, trying to pinpoint the sound, and disentangle it from the echoes of the troopers' footfalls.

There! I twisted, bringing my laspistol round to bear as the noise echoed again, the unmistakable scrabbling of something as large as I was within a handful of metres, my finger tightening on the trigger.

'Don't shoot!' a voice cried, shrill with an edge of hysteria, and I checked the motion in the nick of time. An emaciated figure in the robes of an Administratum functionary, so stained with rock dust and other, less identifiable substances as to be almost unrecognisable, lunged away from me, and appeared to be trying to burrow into the rock with his bare hands. 'I'm not one of them!'

'So I see,' I responded, trying to sound as soothing as possible, and holding up a hand to keep the troopers back. No point in spooking the fellow even more than he already was. I holstered my pistol, and resheathed the chainsword, which seemed to reassure him to some extent, and held out a hand to help him up. 'I'm Commissar Cain, by the way, here with a PDF relief force.' As I'd expected, my name and reputation seemed to calm him at least as effectively as a sedative from the medi-kit would have done, and left him in a much fitter state to answer questions.

'Vallen Clode, Scrivener to the Master of Mines.' His voice was hoarse, so I handed him my canteen; he took it in trembling fingers and drank deeply, spilling much of the water, which etched clean rivulets through the grime encrusted on his face before pattering onto the floor around his boots.

'What happened here?' Donal appeared at my shoulder, making Clode

twitch like a startled sump rat, before he registered that the cadet was relatively harmless, and calmed down again.

‘We found a chamber in the rock,’ Clode said, relinquishing the canteen at last, which was almost empty. ‘Sometimes it happens, you just break through and find a fissure. No one thought anything of it at the time. Then they started appearing, all over the hab.’ His voice was quivering with suppressed hysteria. ‘They came through the walls!’

‘What did?’ I asked, feeling an old familiar terror welling up in me at the sound of his words. I’d heard them in the tombs of Interitus Prime, seen shining metal killers ghosting through solid walls there, as insubstantial as smoke, and I couldn’t shake the fear, irrational as it seemed, that I was about to relive a never-forgotten nightmare. I felt my augmetic fingers flexing involuntarily, as though remembering their flesh and blood predecessors, torn away by a glancing hit from a necron gauss flayer. Before he could answer, though, Donal spoke almost as I did, cutting across me and drowning me out.

‘How did you survive?’ he asked.

‘I hid in the air ducts,’ the scrivener said, gesturing towards a hole in the wall, less than a metre across, from which a metal grille was hanging, clearly recently dislodged. A faint current of air was wafting from it, and I peered suspiciously at the dark patch of shadow inside. It could have been my imagination, but I was certain I could hear a faint, all-too-familiar skittering sound echoing along the narrow shaft.

‘Everyone out,’ I said, drawing my laspistol again, and beginning to back away. Just as well I did, too; no sooner had I started moving than something with too many limbs, and far too many claws and teeth to go with them, erupted from the hole in the wall, and flung itself at me. I squeezed the trigger more by reflex than anything, blowing a hole through its thorax, which at least checked its advance; clearly looking for easier meat it turned, slashing at Clode in a flurry of talon strokes. The luckless scrivener shrieked, once, before the genestealer’s jaws closed around his neck, almost severing his head from his body.

‘Throne on Earth!’ Donal yelled, backing off too, while the troopers opened up with their lasguns. The ‘stealer fell, blown to bloody chunks, and dropping Clode’s spasming body as it collapsed. He was well past any help we could give by now, expiring even before we made it to the door.

‘Cover the vent!’ I shouted, knowing all too well that ‘stealers come in

packs, and it was lucky I did, because more of the nightmarish shapes were emerging from the darkened shaft beyond, their eldritch keening freezing the blood almost as much as the sight of their razor-edged talons, reaching out to rend flesh. Our lasweapons strobed and flashed, the crack of ionised air deafening us as every shot echoed and reverberated in the confined space, but they came on anyway after only the briefest of pauses, bounding over the tottering shelves. One of the troopers went down, torn to pieces in front of my eyes, his blood hanging in the air for a moment like fine, crimson mist, and then we were back in the corridor, scattering as we came, trying to keep our weapons trained on the leaping, scything monstrosities bearing down on us.

‘Commissar!’ Jurgen shouted, stepping in with his melta raised and, forewarned, I closed my eyes momentarily against the retina-searing flash as he pulled the trigger. The ravening cone of white-hot energy which burst from the muzzle vaporised the torso of a ‘stealer reaching out for me as it bounded across the threshold, setting fire to the nearest stack of boxes with the thermal backwash. Alarms inside the storeroom began to whoop.

‘Close the damned door!’ I bellowed, and Donal reached out to grab the handle. A ‘stealer seized his arm just as his fingers closed around it, and he would surely have been dragged to his death in its jaws had I not swung my chainsword almost as it struck, shearing through the creature’s arm, and decapitating it on the backswing as I turned to plant another las-bolt in the face of the monstrosity behind it.

‘Thanks!’ Donal gasped, his face ashen, and yanked on the handle. The door began to close, then stopped, blocked by another taloned arm, which began to flail wildly as the vox op¹⁵ and the surviving troopers stepped in to assist the struggling cadet, adding their strength to his. After an agonising second the door began to swing open again regardless, as the frenzied creatures in the room beyond began to force their way through the aperture created by the wedge of their own bodies.

‘Fire in the hole!’ Vorlens yelled, lobbing a grenade through the widening gap around the jamb, just as I severed the obstructing limb in a spray of foul-smelling ichor, and the door slammed to at last. The muffled *crump!* of the frag charge going off shook the slab of metal, which became pitted by a thousand tiny indentations as the hail of shrapnel pattered against its far side, and everything went quiet.

‘Did we get them all?’ Vorlens asked, sounding shaken.

‘I doubt it,’ I said, jamming the mechanism as best I could from this side, and putting a las-bolt through the locking plate just to make sure. ‘And if those shafts are as extensive as they usually are in a place like this, they could have gone anywhere.’

‘They were pink,’ Donal said, an expression of stupefied astonishment on his face. ‘No one ever said they were pink.’

‘They come in all sorts of colours,’ I told him. I’d seen enough of the damned things over the years to be certain of that. ‘Emperor knows why, though.’¹⁶ I tapped my comm-bead. ‘Cain to all units,’ I said. ‘We’ve made contact. Genestealers definitely present, no other organisms sighted yet.’ A chorus of acknowledgement assured me that the cadets were as ready as they’d ever be, and there was nothing more I could do to warn them.

‘Commissar.’ I barely had time to get my breath back before Heskin’s voice echoed in my comm-bead, gabbling a little with suppressed excitement. ‘We’ve found a fresh tunnel. It’s not on our map.’

‘Show me,’ I said, fishing out the data-slate, and expanding the image as much as I could around the runes that marked the position of his and Klarch’s comm-beads. According to the display, they were in the middle of one of the main tunnels, still a score of metres from any intervening passageways.

‘Just a second,’ Heskin said. ‘I need to get my slate out.’ A moment later the pict screen flickered, and the map was replaced by a grainy image of his face, which looked as though he was standing in the middle of a snowstorm. ‘Are you getting any of this?’

‘Just barely,’ I told him. If the dense rock surrounding us was attenuating the vox signals, it was playing merry hell with the more complex pict transmissions. Heskin began to turn the slate, giving me as wide a view as possible of his surroundings.

‘Looks like a new shaft,’ Vorlens said, craning his neck to peer over my shoulder. Donal had his own slate out again, studying the transmitted pict with every sign of attention, but he still had his laspistol clutched in his other hand, and I had no doubt that under his glove his knuckles would be white. The lad was definitely learning. Jorgen and the surviving troopers were looking warily up and down the tunnels, their weapons at the ready; certain that we’d get plenty of warning of any nasty surprises heading in our direction, I gave most of my attention to the blurry images on the slate in front of me.

‘It does,’ I agreed. The opening in the rock wall Heskin was showing us was ragged, even more so than the tunnel mouths I’d seen earlier, and a litter of equipment was scattered about in front of it, cluttering the floor of the main passageway the troopers and cadets had been following. This turned out to be surprisingly wide, much more so than the one we were in, and I remarked on the fact.

‘That’s one of the extraction shafts,’ Vorlens confirmed. ‘They took out a major vein there about sixty years ago.’ Well, he should know, he’d studied pretty much every centimetre of this Emperor-forsaken pebble while planning his search patterns, so I just took his word for it. That would account for the tram tracks I could see in the background, a couple of mining carts still sitting forlornly on them, waiting to be filled with spoil from the fresh excavation.

‘What’s that equipment?’ I asked, as the view panned past a half-score of milling troopers, all doing their best to look alert, and Klarch, sitting on a crate of something, eating another ration bar. Strange metallic shapes, about the size of a lascannon, too indistinct to be seen clearly through the haze of static, cast twisted shadows across the tunnel floor.

‘Rock drills,’ Heskin said, kicking the nearest one. ‘They look like they were just dropped and abandoned.’ I felt the palms of my hands beginning to itch again. Somehow I doubted that the miners would have been quite so casual about the means of their livelihoods.

‘And mining charges,’ Klarch added, standing up, and gesturing towards the crate which had up until then been supporting his buttocks. ‘This is full of the things. Det cord too.’ My sense of unease intensified. Even if they had been willing to leave their tools lying about, no one would have been that cavalier about a significant quantity of explosives. He raised his voice a little, letting it carry to the troopers surrounding him. ‘So we’d all better be careful what we shoot at.’ No one seemed inclined to dispute the point, so he stuffed the rest of the bar into his mouth, and chewed energetically.

‘Proceed with caution,’ I advised. ‘Our latest information is that a new shaft was being opened when the ’nids first appeared. If it was that one, you could be heading straight for the main swarm.’

‘We haven’t seen any sign of them yet,’ Klarch said, a trifle indistinctly, and drew his laspistol. He must have swallowed, because when he spoke again his voice was clearer. ‘First team with me. Second, stay here and cover our backs.’

‘Maybe we should all go,’ Heskin suggested. ‘If it really is the main brood down there, we’ll need all the firepower we can get.’

‘First squad here,’ Nelys’s voice cut in eagerly, almost at once. ‘We can move up and reinforce.’

‘Or we could stay where we are and complete our assignment,’ Kayla suggested, with a hint of impatience.

‘This isn’t up for debate,’ I snapped. ‘Everyone stay focussed on your current objective until you get orders to the contrary. We’re here to advise and support, not take over.’ Which covered my own arse nicely if things got as messy as I suspected they were about to. I turned to Vorlens. ‘Your call, I’m afraid, lieutenant.’

He didn’t look too happy about it, but he didn’t shirk the responsibility either, simply turning to the vox op and taking the microphone the specialist was holding out towards him. ‘Sergeant Freel,’ he said. ‘Send one of the teams in. Leave the other to hold the tunnel mouth.’ He turned back to me. ‘We don’t know what’s down there, or how wide the shaft is at the end. There’s no point putting the whole squad in danger if they’re just going to get in each other’s way when the shooting starts.’

‘I agree,’ I said, deactivating my comm-bead for a moment. ‘Besides, it’ll remind my lot that they’re technically only here as observers.’ Vorlens nodded, reassured that the cadets would follow his plans without further argument, and I switched it back on again. ‘Keep the pict transmission going if you can,’ I told Heskin. ‘The more we can see, the more the rest of us will know about what we’re facing.’

‘Will do,’ he assured me. The blizzard-obscured cavern on my slate screen seemed to be shaken by a small, brief hivequake as he handed his own data-slate to Klarch. It seemed Sergeant Freel was the kind of NCO who wouldn’t ask his men to do anything he wouldn’t do himself (more fool him, too, as things turned out), so First Team would indeed be making the recon. After a moment the image steadied a little, and I could just make out Klarch’s other hand, holding his laspistol at the ready.

‘All set,’ he said, his voice a little breathless, and Freel made some kind of acknowledgement that the comm-bead failed to pick up. Shadows were moving in the blizzard on the tiny screen in front of me, and I blinked, my eyes already feeling sore from the effort of trying to disentangle a coherent image from it. After a moment I identified them as the troopers given the dubious honour of going down the hole to poke at whatever might be

lurking in its depths with a metaphorical stick. From what little I could make out, none of them were terribly happy about it, which I could hardly blame them for, and I made a mental note to keep an eye on Klarch to see that he kept up morale like he was supposed to.

Strangely enough, given the number of times I've been in a similar situation, I found the unaccustomed sensation of being a spectator rather than a participant peculiarly uncomfortable. I suppose, if I'm honest, there was a certain sense of relief at not being in imminent physical danger myself for once, but the blurred, static-hazed images on my slate screen had a curious, nightmarish tinge to them; at least if I'd been there in person I'd have felt able to affect things in some way. (Of course I'd probably have been dead too, shortly thereafter, but that's beside the point.)

'We're coming to another cavern,' Klarch reported after a few moments. He was near the front of the group, sticking close to the sergeant, as I'd advised all my cadets to do early on in their training; when all else failed, following the lead of the senior NCO present in a crisis would generally be their best chance of getting out in one piece. The point man vanished into the gloom ahead of them, his luminator flickering, until it got so faint I couldn't distinguish it from any of the flares of interference still mottling the pict display.

'Can you see any lights?' I asked. 'Other than your own, I mean.'

'No, commissar.' Klarch sounded puzzled, as well he might, but then he had no idea of the old terrors Clode's words had so unexpectedly kindled in me. Ridiculous, of course, my rational mind kept insisting, but all the same, now the memories of that ghastly tomb world had been raised, they couldn't be that lightly dismissed. 'Should we?'

'Emperor's bowels, I hope not,' I said, without thinking, and Vorlens glanced in my direction, his expression curious. Then, because I couldn't help myself, I added 'if you see anything that looks like a green glow up ahead, just turn back.' If there really were necrons here, the only sensible option would be to run for the ship, call a couple of SDF gunboats to pound the place to gravel, and get a message to Amberley as quickly as possible.

'Acknowledged,' Klarch said, in a tone which left me in no doubt that he was wondering if I'd been at the amasec (chance would have been a fine thing under the circumstances), and I looked up to find Vorlens looking at me speculatively.

'A green glow?' he asked.

I nodded. 'Something I ran into in a place like this once,' I said. 'Just discounting the possibility, that's all.'

'I see.' Vorlens nodded too, thoughtfully. 'And if I asked what it was?'

'I'd rather not tell you,' I said truthfully. 'An inquisitor I know wouldn't be pleased.' Amberley's line on the necrons seemed to be that the general population was better off not knowing about them, and since pretty much everyone they'd ever come into contact with was dead, that was a surprisingly easy secret to keep. 'Just take my word for it, if they're around, we'll know about it soon enough.' Which was true so far as it went, although, had we but known, we would soon be engulfed in events so cataclysmic I would almost have welcomed an enemy as straightforwardly uncomplicated as the necrons.

Vorlens was clearly about to make some kind of remark in response, but before he could do so the recon detail entered the cavern, and our attention was taken up entirely by the events unfolding there.

'It's big,' Klarch reported. 'Our luminators can barely reach the far wall.' He waved the slate in his off-hand, showing a brief glimpse of what might have been smooth chamber walls, the first I'd seen since we'd arrived on this benighted rock, although the pict quality was so poor it was hard to be sure. Nevertheless, I felt a knot of apprehension tightening itself in the pit of my stomach. I might have asked Klarch to put my mind at rest by getting some close-ups and proving definitively that the walls were as pitted as the rest of the caverns, but I never got the chance.

'Incoming!' somebody screamed, opening up on full auto, and within seconds the tiny transceiver in my ear was full of the sounds of battle. I had a momentary sight of a heaving mass of chitin bearing down on Klarch, three or four genestealers and what looked like a couple of gaunts, before he dropped the slate and it abruptly stopped transmitting. I could still hear the progress of the one-sided battle, though, as his comm-bead continued to work, the *crack!* of lasweapons mingling with the shrieks of the soldiery, the ululation of the 'nids, and the unmistakable retching sound of firing fleshborers.

'Fall back! Fire and movement!' Sergeant Freel bellowed, but the sound of lasweapons was already growing sporadic.

'They're already in the tunnel!' Klarch yelled desperately. 'Heskin, defensive positions!' The lad would have made a good commissar, probably, still thinking of the bigger picture even as his own life hung by a

thread, but he wasn't going to get the chance now. His last scream was still echoing in my ear as I turned to Vorlens.

'We have to keep them contained!' I said. 'If they get out into the tunnels now, they can pick us off at their leisure.'

He nodded grimly, already reaching for the vox. 'Blaine, Torven, sector nineteen. Reinforce fourth squad.' He looked at me, and shrugged. 'What's left of it.'

I nodded, having recognised one of the names as the platoon sergeant accompanying Nelys and Kayla. 'Nelys, report,' I said. Under the circumstances, I wanted to hear what was going on from one of my own people.

'We're moving to reinforce,' Nelys told me, his words overlaid by the echo of hurrying footsteps.

'Us too,' Stebbins volunteered, his voice tense.

'Heskin, sit tight,' I ordered. He would have overheard the exchanges, as I'd intended him to, so right now with any luck he'd be digging in, secure in the knowledge that help was on its way. 'Hold your position and wait for backup.'

'What about Klarch and the others?' Heskin asked. 'If we move fast enough we might...'

'They're beyond help,' I told him shortly. 'You heard what Klarch said, the 'nids are already in the tunnel. Your only hope is to sit tight and pick them off as they emerge.'

'Acknowledged,' he said, sounding far from happy about it.

'If we take this access tunnel, we can be there ourselves in a couple of minutes,' Donal said, glancing up from his slate, which was displaying the map again. Sure enough, a narrow conduit was marked, barely wide enough to move along in single file, but the moment I saw it I knew he was right. So much for staying on the sidelines, I thought.

'Come on!' Vorlens said, gesturing to his men, and double-timing it in the direction Donal had indicated. As usual, I felt I had no option but to follow; maintaining my reputation, and my authority over the cadets, demanded it.

'Right behind you!' I replied, turning to follow, and making sure Donal went into the tunnel ahead of me. If he really thought it was a good idea to go charging into the middle of a 'nids swarm, he was welcome to go first.



FOUR

Donal was right: a few metres further on we found a narrow passageway, lined with pipes and cabling, heading in the direction we wanted. (Or at least in the direction of the battle, which in my case was far from being the same thing.) It was even more cramped than I'd feared, barely wide enough to walk down, our shoulders brushing the ironmongery bolted to the walls and occasional protrusions in the rock as we passed. Fortunately Vorlens was still leading from the front, disappearing down the fissure like a homing ferret, and his men followed without hesitation. Donal was hard on their heels, which left Jurgen and me standing alone in the main passageway for a moment.

'There's something I don't understand,' my aide said, lowering his voice conspiratorially, and leaning a little closer to give me the full benefit of his halitosis. Which was hardly a novelty, but under the circumstances I was inclined to listen. Despite his unprepossessing appearance, and body odour which would have made an ork blench, he was pretty much the only man I ever trusted. Which was hardly surprising, given the number of times he'd saved my miserable hide over the years.

'Which is?' I asked.

Jurgen's forehead furrowed under its usual patina of grime, which by now had been richly supplemented by the dust drifting everywhere in the crudely chiselled labyrinth. 'If that quill-pusher really had been hiding in the air vents,' he said slowly, 'how come the 'stealers didn't get him?'

'I've been wondering that too,' I admitted. Even though I'd hardly had much time to mull over Clode's abruptly truncated story, parts of it still bothered me. In my experience, air vents and service ducts were precisely the kind of places the invading organisms would go to ground, as evidenced

by their presence in the shaft leading to the storage room in which we'd encountered them. Anyone hoping to find refuge in one would be abruptly and fatally disappointed, in pretty short order. 'Perhaps he just wasn't down there for very long.' In any case, there wasn't much point in worrying about it. As you'll readily appreciate, I was a lot more concerned about where the rest of them had gone, especially as I was about to squeeze into a narrow passageway myself.

All I can say for the few moments it took us to reach the main shaft where Heskin was doing his best to stem the tide is that they were over mercifully quickly. As I've already remarked, the service tunnel was claustrophobically narrow, so much so that it was all but impossible to turn round in it, and my shoulder blades tingled the whole time we were down there, anticipating the sudden impact of a genestealer's talons. Only Jurgen's presence behind me, which I could smell even if I couldn't see him, went some way towards assuaging my fears; he was clearly having some difficulty with the bulky melta in such a confined space, judging by the leitmotif of *sotto voce* profanity which accompanied our progress, but I was still grateful that he'd kept it in his hands. Judging by the voices in my comm-bead, we were going to need all the firepower we could get in a moment or two.

Heskin and the quintet of troopers with him were apparently giving a pretty good account of themselves, at least so far, having caught the emerging 'nids in a withering crossfire the moment they emerged from the tunnel mouth. Being 'nids, of course, this hadn't particularly bothered them, but it had slowed them down a bit, just long enough for First Squad to arrive and pitch in, which seemed to be evening up the odds a little. Once Second Squad and ourselves arrived, we might actually be able to contain them after all. I hoped...

'This way!' Vorlens called, from somewhere up ahead, and after a moment the looming bulk of Donal's greatcoat and cap in front of me moved aside too, to reveal a wide tunnel carved through the rock.

As I stepped out of the narrow passageway behind the cadet, I glanced around, orientating myself from long habit, and getting my first glimpse of the disputed shaft in the process. It was even bigger than it had appeared on the data-slate screen, fully wide enough to have driven a Chimera down, with plenty of room to spare on either side. The tram tracks I'd noted before ran away into the distance, presumably to a spoil heap or a processing area,

and I almost tripped on the nearest rail as I turned towards the sounds of combat.

To my mingled surprise and relief, the combined force of cadets and PDF troopers looked as though they were still holding the line, although the 'nids seemed perilously close to gaining the upper hand. None of the 'stealers or hormagaunts had succeeded in closing the distance enough to get into close combat range before being shot to bits yet, which was a minor miracle in itself, but a small brood of gaunts was poised in the entrance to the narrow side tunnel, raking the main cavern with fleshborer fire. Several of the troopers were down too by now, thrashing and screaming, or ominously inert, but the survivors were still pouring las-bolts into the chitinous horde with undiminished enthusiasm.

'Commissar!' Heskin looked up and saw me, relief etched on his face for a moment, before all traces of expression vanished, along with most of his head. His corpse flew backwards, propelled by an impact far greater than the deadly clouds of beetles disgorged by the fleshborers could possibly have delivered. I turned to the tunnel mouth, horrified realisation curdling my guts, and saw what I most dreaded. One of the larger warrior forms had joined the gaunts, imbuing them with malign purpose, the unmistakable bulk of a venom cannon hanging from its lower limbs.

'Shoot the big one!' I shouted, hoping to disrupt the influence of the hive mind, if only for a moment or two, but all I succeeded in doing was attracting its attention, and to my horror the monstrous weapon began to swing in my direction. I dived for cover behind the nearest ore cart, hearing the wood explode above me, and the hiss of the hail of deadly poison crystals passing just over my head. A moment later an unmistakable odour of unwashed socks informed me that Jurgen had made it to our improvised refuge as well.

'Commissar.' Kayla popped up on the other side of me, and loosed off a couple of las-bolts at the hulking abomination, before ducking back. 'We're getting our arses handed to us here.' As a formal sitrep,¹⁷ I suppose it left something to be desired, but I'd come to pretty much the same conclusion myself, so I couldn't really fault her analysis.

'I've got a shot,' Jurgen informed us, as casually as if he was asking whether I'd like some more tanna. The warrior staggered back a pace as Vorlens and his three remaining troopers gave it five rapid rounds apiece, and Jurgen squeezed the trigger of the melta.

The results were gratifying, to say the least. The towering creature shrieked, staggered, and went down, steaming like a grox roast (although smelling a great deal less pleasant), its heavy weapon seared into uselessness. It scrabbled against the stone floor for a moment, gouging parallel grooves in the rock, attempting to rise, before another barrage of lasgun fire put it out of the fight for good. Deprived of its influence, the gaunts milled uncertainly for a moment, before retreating deeper into the tunnel, though they still kept up their barrage of fleshborer rounds.

‘They’re pulling back!’ Nelys cried, and actually began to stand, flourishing his chainsword like the hero of a holodrama. ‘Follow up and finish them!’

‘Get your frakking head down before they finish you!’ I bellowed, quite unnecessarily in retrospect, as he still had his comm-bead in. I swear he winced as he followed my instructions. ‘If you set foot in that tunnel you’re a dead man!’ He complied with ill grace, but at least he ducked back behind a handy heap of rubble, perhaps encouraged by the noisy demise of another of the PDF troopers who happened to be standing nearby.

‘Can we seal the shaft with those mining charges?’ Vorlens asked, indicating the crate Klarch had been enjoying his last meal on such a short time before.

‘Haven’t a clue,’ I admitted. ‘For all I know it’ll bring the whole roof down on top of us.’ That seemed the most likely result to me, although, of course, I couldn’t tell from there how much was in the box. I did know what an explosion in a confined space could do, though, and under most circumstances I’d be disinclined to risk it. Right now, however, we didn’t seem to have a lot of options left. The scuttling in the tunnel was beginning to sound more purposeful again, which meant that another of the synapse creatures was beginning to restore order, and that we could expect another co-ordinated assault at any time. I indicated the box with a tilt of my head. ‘The real problem’s going to be getting our hands on it,’ I added.

‘Not a problem,’ Nelys assured me, and before I could protest he was up and running, head down, as though the hail of fleshborer rounds was nothing more deadly than a rain shower.

‘Frakhead,’ Kayla said, a tinge of admiration elbowing its way past the disapproval in her voice, and she began to pop off las-rounds in the general direction of the tunnel mouth.

‘Give him covering fire!’ I ordered, although Donal and most of the

troopers were already doing so. Jurgen triggered the melta again, and a ravening blast of superheated air belched down the tunnel, eliciting a shriek which set my teeth on edge. It sounded as though the synapse beastie was having problems of its own, and I began to hope that the main assault might just be delayed another moment or two. It was a vain hope, however. Nelys had almost made it to the box of explosives when another warrior form, its body scorched and leaking ichor, but still functioning far too well for my peace of mind, emerged from the tunnel mouth, and aimed another tube of flesh in his direction.

‘Nelys, two o’clock!’ Donal shouted, just in time, and the impetuous cadet checked his rush, diving sideways to take refuge behind an ore cart which had apparently been removed from the rails for some reason. Powerful acids seared their way through the stone where he’d been standing an instant before, as the devourer rounds burst, spattering their lethal payload, and a few stray drops began to eat their way through the wooden slats making up the mobile ore bin he was hiding behind.

‘Now what’s he up to?’ Kayla muttered, shooting at the hulking creature again, and for a moment I thought she meant the ‘nid, until she added, ‘Hasn’t got the sense he was born with.’ Nelys peered cautiously round the obstruction, clearly wondering if he dared make another run for it, and she tapped the comm-bead in her ear impatiently. ‘It’s got wheels, orkbrain.’

‘Oh, right.’ Nelys divined her meaning almost at once, and began to move cautiously towards the box of explosives, pushing the makeshift barrier in front of him. It was too flimsy to stop more than another round or two, but with any luck the ‘nid wouldn’t have enough time to get that many shots off in any case.

‘Keep firing,’ I encouraged everyone. ‘We’ve got them on the run.’ This wasn’t exactly true, but at least we were holding them, which was more than I’d expected when we got into this mess in the first place. Jurgen nodded, and fired the melta again, barbecuing the ‘nid neat as you please. ‘Well done, Jurgen.’

‘You’re welcome, sir.’ My aide nodded, as though I’d just thanked him for bringing me a mug of tanna and a florn cake, and resumed his watchful posture as the warrior form flailed and expired in a cloud of rank-smelling steam, its now flaccid limbs trailing down the gentle slope behind it.

‘Will they send out another one?’ Vorlens asked, and I shook my head.

‘Probably not.’ I took in the scattered corpses of the tyranid organisms,

interspersed with too many casualties of our own for my liking, and performed a quick mental calculation. 'They can't have too many synapse creatures left by now. Maybe only one, if we're lucky. That means they'll try to protect it in the tunnel.'

'They'll have to do a lot better than that, sir,' Nelys said in my comm-bead, the overconfident tone I'd learned to dread creeping back into his voice. He'd reached the box by now, and had levered the top off, before rummaging in it eagerly. 'There's enough fyceline in here to bring the whole tunnel down.' He emerged again, holding something up to the light. 'And det cord. You reckon two minutes will be enough?'

'Nothing like enough!' I snapped, but I was too late. Even before I spoke, he'd clipped off a length, and heaved the whole box full of explosive nastiness into the ore truck.

'He's insane!' Kayla said, the tone of grudging admiration even more pronounced than before. It was clear now what Nelys had in mind, and I have to admit that, for once, he seemed to have had the germ of a decent idea; apart from the appalling risk of entombing us along with the 'nids, of course.

'Clearly,' I agreed, and turned to Donal. 'Don't just stand there, help him!'

'Yes, commissar.' Donal leapt to his feet and sprinted over to his fellow cadet, while everyone else kept wasting las-bolts down the darkness of the tunnel. There didn't seem anything much to shoot at any more, but that didn't mean a thing where tyrannids were concerned, so I let them get on with it. At least it gave the troopers something to do, which would be good for morale, and with any luck it would divert the swarm's attention from what was going on above their heads. Nelys and Donal got their shoulders to the ore cart and heaved; within seconds they'd got it up to a fair turn of speed, sprinting along behind it while its deadly cargo bounced around in a fashion I found far from comforting.

'Cease firing!' I shouted, just as they got close enough to the tunnel mouth to seem in imminent danger of being felled by their own comrades. But I needn't have worried; Vorlens' men were pretty disciplined for PDF, and had seen the danger for themselves.

With a final heave, the two cadets rounded the corpse of the warrior Jurgen had felled, and started the cart rattling down the gentle slope beyond. The moment it was moving they flung themselves aside, no doubt anticipating a further hail of bioengineered lethality, but it seemed my guess was correct;

the 'nids were retrenching at the bottom of their hole.

Not that it did them much good, of course. Donal and Nelys were already running for cover as the cart disappeared into the darkness, the echoes of its passage reverberating back as it bounced into the depths of the shaft. The noise and movement evidently distracted our abominable adversaries, as I distinctly heard another barrage of fleshborer fire, no doubt an instinctive response to the intrusion. Then I was flinging myself flat behind the dubious refuge of the ore cart, certain that Nelys's two minutes must surely be up.

I wasn't wrong. With a roar like an ammunition dump exploding, a plume of smoke and rock dust, probably mixed with fragments of tyranid if I'd cared enough to look, erupted from the tunnel mouth ahead of us, turning it into a miniature fumarole. Choking, like everyone else present, I clambered to my feet, blinking my eyes clear of the stinging residue of the detonation, and tried to distinguish the babble of voices around me from the ringing in my ears. 'Donal! Nelys! Report!' I demanded, still by no means certain that either would be in a fit state to respond.

'Still here, commissar,' Donal assured me laconically. 'Both of us.'

'Did we get them?' Nelys asked, coughing loudly as he inhaled a little too much of the results of his handiwork.

'You could say that,' I agreed. The entire tunnel was collapsing, chunks of rock as big as I was thundering down from the ceiling to crack and craze against the uneven floor, while innumerable smaller pieces clattered and rolled about them. It looked to me as if it was blocked from end to end, and that any 'nids which had escaped the conflagration would have been mashed to pulp before they could flee.

'Yes!' Nelys crowed, grinning from ear to ear, and I fought down the impulse to chide him. Better to let him have his moment of triumph; at least the bang seemed to have knocked a little of the starch out of his underwear, which was no bad thing.

'Well done,' I said, making sure I included Donal in the general backslapping. 'If a trifle reckless.' I turned, hearing the clatter of running feet, to find Frister, Stebbins, and Second Squad double-timing it into the battlezone.

Stebbins gaped at the mess for a moment, then recollected himself and saluted. 'Commissar. What happened?'

'Nelys squished the bugs,' Kayla told him.

‘Oh.’ He looked vaguely disappointed. ‘Anything we can do, now we’re here?’

‘Help the wounded,’ I said, conscious of having an image to maintain, and turned to Vorlens. ‘Then I suggest we resume the sweep. There could still be some stragglers roaming around.’

‘Right.’ The lieutenant nodded, and went into a huddle with his NCOs, leaving me to gaze thoughtfully at the mound of debris. There would be no chance now of allaying my nagging sense of disquiet by inspecting the chamber at the far end, or better still, sending someone else to do it, even if it hadn’t collapsed along with the tunnel.

Once again, I told myself that Clode’s words had just been a figure of speech: no one knew better than I did that if there really were necrons here, none of us would have made it out of the docking bay, let alone this deep into the asteroid. And they would have slaughtered the tyranids too, I had no doubt of that. But something about the whole situation still struck me as fundamentally wrong, and if I’ve learned one thing in my century or more of attempting to evade all the trouble the galaxy keeps throwing at me, it’s to trust that nagging sense of paranoia.

‘Good news, sir.’ A familiar voice, and equally familiar odour, broke into my reverie. Jurgen was standing at my shoulder, the melta slung across his back next to his lasgun, now that he had no further pressing need of either. He was holding a data-slate, his brow furrowed in concentration as he studied the tangled mess of the mining hab’s internal layout. ‘I think I’ve just found a kitchen.’

Well, he had, and I must admit that a couple of salt grox buns and a mug of fresh recaf went a long way towards improving my mood. But I didn’t feel really comfortable again until we were back aboard the Aquila, our sweep finally completed, and the last few genestealers hunted down and dispatched.

‘It sounds like you did a good job,’ Visiter greeted me on our return, while the subdued cadets filed back to their seats, trying not to look at the empty ones which had been occupied by Heskin and Klarch on our flight here. I’d been careful to find them all plenty of makework, to keep them from brooding on our losses, but now, on the long journey back, I’d have to keep an eye on them; sooner or later the reaction would set in. With any luck, most of them would sleep for the next few hours, but after that I’d need to

handle them carefully until they'd had time to come to terms with what had happened. They'd all known intellectually that casualties happen on a battlefield, but it was the first time they'd actually experienced it, and the first time any of them had lost a fellow cadet.

'Good enough,' I conceded wearily. He already knew about our losses, of course, so there was no point in going into that now. 'You said you had something to show me?'

'I do.' The commodore nodded, apparently amused at some private joke. 'Keep your eye on the viewport.' He settled into the seat next to me, apparently unconcerned by Jurgen's proximity, and tapped his comm-bead. 'Take us out, Mister Sprie.'

We'd boarded the shuttle in the cavern we'd disembarked in, little less than a day ago, and the dull grey walls beyond the armourcrys, and the disembowelled utility craft, still looked exactly the same as they had when we arrived. The great iron doors leading to open space had been ponderously retracting while we took our seats, and now the mottled rock began to slip past the viewport as Sprie fed power to the engines, lifting the Aquila from the floor and nudging it gently back towards its natural element.

'The funny thing is,' Visiter told me, 'we'd never have noticed the thing if you hadn't told us to loiter off-station. It's not exactly visible, unless you get close to it.'

'What isn't?' I asked, as Sprie boosted us out of the hangar bay in a neat parabola. We were skimming the surface, it seemed to me, swooping low over the cracked and desolate terrain, so close that a few of the surface-mounted pylons I'd noticed on the way in seemed even higher than our flight path.

'Luckily I thought of gettin' the young shavers to practise some low-altitude attack runs while we were waitin',' Visiter continued, as if he hadn't heard the question. Fair enough, then, I thought, if he wanted to be all mysterious about it, I wouldn't spoil his fun. 'Orks use rocks like this for transport, you know, as well as proper ships.'

I did know, as it happened, having been aboard a couple in my time, so I nodded. 'Usually for large-scale planetary assaults,' I said. From an orkish point of view, they were perfect for the job; either whatever braking system their meks had been able to cobble together worked, delivering a far greater number of warriors to the surface than a conventional drop-ship could ever

have done, or they failed, resulting in a titanic explosion and widespread destruction, which they seemed to think was almost as good.

‘Quite,’ Visiter said, his moustache quivering. After a moment he pointed. ‘There it is.’

It took me a moment to make out what he was indicating, then my jaw dropped. It was a tyranid bio-construct, wedged deep in a fissure on the asteroid’s surface, almost hidden by the shadows surrounding it. ‘That’s a mycetic spore!’ I said, not bothering to conceal my surprise.

‘Certainly looks like one,’ the commodore agreed, clearly pleased with my reaction. ‘Probably been driftin’ around ever since the SDF took out the hive ships last year, and just made for this place once it got into range.’

‘Any idea how long it’s been there?’ I asked.

Visiter shrugged. ‘Not long, by the look of it. But I’d bet half my pension that’s how your swarm arrived.’

‘Not a bet I’d take,’ I agreed. As Sprie brought us around in a wide, slow circle, I could clearly see the split in the side through which the organisms had disembarked, the interior lit by the external floodlights of our Aquila. The flesh inside had been desiccated by exposure to vacuum, of course, but still seemed to retain a little resilience, in contrast to the hard outer shell. That meant that it had arrived relatively recently, I was sure, but it would take a Magos Biologis to narrow it down any more than that. ‘Did you find any others?’

‘Others?’ Now it was Visiter’s turn to look surprised. ‘No. Should we have done?’

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted, my sense of unease returning even more strongly than before. The pod could only have held about a score of tyranids, and we’d accounted for more or less that many in our face-to-face encounters aboard the asteroid. Up until then I’d been assuming that a significant number of them had been trapped and exterminated in the tunnel collapse as well; but if not, and the chamber Klarch had discovered was all but empty when Nelys’s bomb went off, that brought me right back to my original question. What had killed all the miners so swiftly and efficiently? Why hadn’t we discovered any bodies? And if someone or something else *had* been responsible, had the tyranids simply arrived after the dust had settled and taken advantage of the abandoned installation to set up home?

Even more unsettling was the thought that, if some other force had indeed attacked the mining hab, where were they now?

Eventually I succeeded in dozing off, more from sheer physical fatigue than anything else, but my dreams were far from restful, full of blank-faced metal killers, and their scuttling, spider-like servitors.

Had I but known, of course, all my questions would be answered soon enough; but if I'd had even the merest inkling of what form those answers would take, you can be sure my dreams would have been infinitely worse than they were.

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Editorial Note:

I had considered placing this extract at the very beginning of Cain's narrative; although, on reflection, this seems like the proper place to insert it.

From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127. M42.

The forty-first millennium ended, like so many of its predecessors, in widespread conflict; although it's probably fair to say that seldom in the history of the Imperium has humanity found itself beset by so many enemies, on so many sides. The broad brush strokes of most popular accounts have tended to parcel up the various war zones with unjustified neatness, however, blurring the manner in which successive crises interacted with one another, and in some cases overlapped.

Nowhere is this misconception more egregious than in the popular image of the two principal battlefronts of the time: the so-called Black Crusade, and the Tyrannic wars. In the minds of most interested laymen, the Black Crusade was largely confined to the aptly named Segmentum Obscurus, while the tyranid hive fleets constituted a threat solely to the systems of the Eastern Arm. In reality, the picture was a great deal more confused, with the raiding fleets of the Great Enemy striking far from the main battleground around the Cadian Gate and its adjacent sectors. At least one such flotilla is reliably recorded as being active as far to the East as the Damocles Gulf, close to what was then the border of the Tau Empire, although why it should have been there, and the circumstances of its eventual defeat, remain

shrouded in conjecture and debate.

I propose to devote a modest chapter to the affair, however, since one thing about it that is beyond dispute is the involvement of the near-legendary hero Ciaphas Cain, whose stalwart defence of the planet Perlia remains justifiably celebrated even today.

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FIVE

‘They tell me you were recommending a full quarantine of the place,’ Brasker said, his dry, papery voice, as always, managing to sound both condescending and mildly incredulous. With one or two exceptions (Commodore Visiter and Rorkins, the retired colonel in charge of the storm-trooper cadets, chief among them), I found my colleagues on the faculty tedious company at best, and the schola’s bursar irked me more than most. Almost a parody of an Administratum functionary, his grey skin and creased robes invariably spattered with ink, he had an opinion on every subject, which he generously shared with everyone in the vicinity whether they were interested in it or not. Apart from the progeni, of course, who he preferred to ignore, expressing the view at every opportunity that their presence was the only thing preventing the schola from running as efficiently as he would have liked.

Unfortunately, his society was the tariff the rest of us had to bear if we wanted to dine in the buttery, which the kitchen staff were skilled enough to make seem worth the irritation. I’d arrived in the hall a little late, thanks to some administrative work that, for once, I’d been unable to delegate to Jurgen, and my heart had sunk as I’d approached the high table through the usual gaggle of face-stuffing cadets to find that the only vacant seat left was next to Brasker. (Something I had anticipated, of course, since the rest of us had long since divined that our best chance of avoiding his company was to arrive early for meals, but I’d clung to the hope that someone else would be later than I was.)

‘They tell you correctly,’ I replied as I seated myself, maintaining a veneer of politeness despite my irritation. All those years of attending tedious diplomatic functions while I was attached to the Lord General’s staff had

made the pose of courteous attention second nature to me, and I was too seasoned a campaigner to make needless enemies. Particularly of the man who controlled the schola's budget, and who, so far, had been almost preternaturally trusting about my departmental accounts.

'But you were overruled, of course,' Brasker went on, as though he already knew, rather than transparently fishing for gossip.

'I'm afraid so,' I said, digging into my poached plover. Throwing him a couple of conversational titbits now and again never hurt, I'd found; he might have been an opinionated bore with all the charisma of a servitor, but like most bureaucrats above a certain rank he was well connected among the Administratum, and blithely indiscreet. The little crumbs of rumour I'd allowed to fall in his vicinity before had been amply repaid in far more interesting kind, and I'd been stringing for Amberley for too long not to cultivate so potentially useful a source. 'I'm still not entirely satisfied that it was safe to resume mining.'

That piqued his interest nicely, of course. 'And why would that be so?' he asked, as one of the servants removed the remains of his starter, and deposited a platter of gently-steaming fish in front of him, garnished with thinly sliced sticks of fried tuber.

I shrugged. 'That's just it,' I admitted, vaguely surprised to find myself confiding in the fellow. I can only account for it by admitting that my formless forebodings hadn't diminished at all in the week since our return, and that it was a relief to finally be able to verbalise them. Not to mention the sure and certain knowledge that, thanks to his incurable tendency to gossip, it would soon be all round the Administratum that Cain had doubts about the whole enterprise. That should cover my own back very nicely, and enhance my reputation into the bargain, if, Emperor forbid, things did go wrong up there again. 'There was nothing concrete I could put my finger on. Just an old soldier's instinct, I suppose.'

'Hmm.' Brasker masticated thoughtfully for a moment. 'I can see why you didn't get very far. The Administratum is built on a firm foundation of solid and verifiable fact. One man's instinct, however finely honed, wouldn't carry an awful lot of weight.'

'That's because you put more faith in your data-slates than in matters of the soul,' Sister Julien, the battle-scarred Celestian veteran in charge of the Sororitas novitiae, put in.¹⁸ 'You wouldn't even listen to the word of the Emperor unless it was in triplicate.' The two of them were old sparring

partners, bickering more-or-less amiably whenever they came into contact, although their respective world views seemed so much at variance, and so deeply entrenched, I never really understood why they bothered.

‘I’m afraid the word of Cain is regarded rather more lightly,’ I told her, taking refuge behind the façade of modesty I’d erected so carefully over the years. As Emperor-botherers go she was tolerable enough company, I suppose, and we’d even spent a few surprisingly pleasant evenings reminiscing over some old campaigns together. That said, I’d been in the field with the Sororitas too often to consider them reliable when things got messy, far too apt to go looking for martyrdom or heretics to cleanse instead of following the battle plan, even if it left the real soldiers flapping in the breeze while they did so. Which, along with the risk of getting dragged off to chapel whenever the conversation flagged, had got in the way of any real friendship developing between us.

‘More fool them, then,’ she said decisively. Her irises were hazel, and regarded me over the lump of a repeatedly broken nose with faint amusement. ‘If ever a man had the Emperor at his back, it must have been you.’

‘I’ve heard it said,’ I admitted, more than a little uncomfortable with the way the conversation was heading, ‘but I’m sure He’s no more interested in me than in anyone else.’

That seemed to satisfy her.

‘If anything,’ Brasker said, ‘I’d expect His attention to be directed primarily at the Cadian Gate at the moment.’

‘Oh?’ I seized on the apparent change of topic with alacrity. ‘And why would that be?’ My own fish arrived, and I began plying my cutlery, slicing through the thin coating of batter to flake the succulent flesh from the bones.

‘You mean you haven’t heard?’ Brasker feigned surprise. ‘There’s been a massive incursion from the Eye of Terror. The Traitor Legions are massing for a full assault, they tell me, and the fighting’s already engulfed most of the Segmentum Obscurus.’

I suppose, in retrospect, it seems astonishing that we were able to discuss such cataclysmic events in so casual a manner, but in our defence I have to point out that they were transpiring on the far side of the galaxy, and that from where we were sitting the tyranids seemed far more of a clear and present danger. At the time, we had no reason to believe that Abaddon’s

latest rampage would have any more of an impact on the Eastern Arm than the previous ones had, which amounted to little more than vague rumours and unsubstantiated battle reports trickling down the astropathic network long after the dust had settled.

‘Well, whoever “they” are, you can tell them they’re wrong,’ Rorkins put in from the opposite end of the table. ‘And if they know what’s good for them, they’d better stop spreading heretical twaddle like that.’

We exchanged a look. I couldn’t prove it, of course, but I was pretty sure he’d served his time as an active storm-trooper in the ranks of the Inquisition’s private army, rather than the Imperial Guard, and kept in touch at least sporadically with his former employers, and I had no doubt at all that he harboured similar suspicions about my connection with Amberley.

Brasker, of course, was too dense, or naive, to realise that he was perilously close to getting his name on a list that would be very bad for his health, and positively inflated with self-importance. ‘I have it from a very reliable source,’ he said, ‘among the Codiciers at the legation of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica.’ At which point I pricked up my ears, thinking that although they were undoubtedly exaggerated (I’ve yet to meet an astropath without a flair for the dramatic), there might be some truth to the stories after all. ‘They’re already calling it the thirteenth Black Crusade, apparently.’

‘Stuff and nonsense,’ Julien remarked, snorting derisively, and holding out a metal cup for one of the hovering servants to fill with recaf. ‘Abaddon was finished after the Gothic War, everyone knows that. He wouldn’t dare show his face in the Emperor’s realm again.’

‘Well, let’s hope you’re right,’ I said, finding my appetite somewhat diminished. I’d faced the servants of the Great Enemy more often than I cared to contemplate, and in my experience it was never wise to underestimate them. Particularly a ten thousand year old madman, who’d been marinating himself in the raw stuff of Chaos for most of that time.

Abandoning my supper for the moment, I surveyed the crowded dining room from our slightly elevated position, picking out my now diminished band of commissar cadets, who were tucking into their somewhat plainer fare heartily enough. They seemed to have adjusted to the loss of their comrades about as well as I could have hoped, although Briel was still causing me some mild concern, seeming a little less focussed than he had done before our encounter with the tyranids. He and Klarch had been

friends, and he'd clearly been shaken by the two deaths. After all, none of the cadets had any family, or ties of any kind beyond the ones they'd forged for themselves here. I remembered well enough how that felt.

My eye fell on Kayla and Stebbins, hunched over a data-slate as they ate, comparing notes on the assignment I'd given them that afternoon (something about the degree of proof required before summarily executing a trooper in the field, if I remember rightly), and Nelys, chewing thoughtfully as he listened to the conversation, occasionally interjecting something they were clearly finding far from helpful. Donal was laughing with Frister and Dallory, sharing some kind of joke, and I determined then and there that I'd at least take Brasker's nonsense seriously enough to prepare them for the worst if it should come. And for that, if nothing else, I suppose I should thank the ridiculous little man.

'Heretical infiltration?' Donal asked, a tone of surprise in his voice. As the weather was unseasonably warm for these latitudes,¹⁹ I'd decided to take the next morning's tutorial outdoors, commandeering the roof of one of the outer towers for the purpose. I'd done so often enough before for no one to consider it out of the ordinary, and there was less chance of being overheard away from the main building. The last thing I wanted was word of what I was doing getting back to Brasker, and thence to half the planet before the week was out. Rorkins had been right, the important thing now was to calm everybody's fears, not make them worse by voxcasting to all and sundry that Cain the Hero was taking the rumours of impending doom seriously.

I nodded, after a quick glance over the parapet to make sure there was no one else within earshot. From up here we were afforded a breathtaking view across the valley to the peaks beyond, many of which were permanently shrouded in snow. The distant roofs of Salubria glittered in the warm autumn sunshine, huddled around the river a couple of kilometres away and a few hundred metres below the crag on which our citadel stood, while the constant background noise of the schola echoed up to surround us, a barely-perceived buzz of human activity. A party of youths was down on the firing range, blowing cardboard targets to confetti under the watchful eye of one of the drill abbots, while over to our left a squad of early adolescents was embarking on a run up one of the nearby mountains, urged on by their proctors.²⁰ Narrowing my eyes, I was just able to make out the familiar shape of the black-painted truck from the judiciary in Havendown, making

its way up the winding track which led to our gates, with its weekly delivery of condemned criminals for the interrogation, execution, and live fire exercises. Sure that everything was peaceful and orderly, and that there was no chance of being overheard, I nodded.

‘Heretical infiltration,’ I confirmed.

Nelys stuck up a hand. ‘I thought we were supposed to be studying interrogation and intelligence retrieval this morning,’ he said, sounding vaguely disappointed.

‘We were, and we will,’ I reassured him. ‘But this topic is related, and in my experience there are few more pressing pieces of intelligence than the existence of a heretic cell attempting to subvert our forces from within.’ As I’d expected, the casual reference to my colourful history hooked them at once, and even Nelys perked up, looking even more attentive than usual. Briel seemed to be with us as well, which was something of a relief. I nodded sombrely, and glanced around again, this time for dramatic effect rather than the fear of unseen listeners. ‘I need hardly tell you that whatever you hear in these tutorials should be kept to yourselves. Some of my more academically-minded colleagues might not approve of me modifying the syllabus.’

That was an understatement if ever I’d uttered one. Our principal, Cuthbert Cathcart, a minor ecclesiarch who’d spent his entire life hindering the education of the youth of the Imperium in one capacity or another, thanks to a mind so narrow I was amazed he could balance a hat on it, would probably have an embolism on the spot if he ever found out. Fortunately, once his unfortunate charges passed into the hands of whatever service branch they’d been directed to, Visiter, Rorkins and I (and a few of the others, I suppose) were able to straighten out most of them reasonably satisfactorily.²¹

I glanced at the cadet appearing to pay the least amount of attention to me, and most to the Sororitas novices who had begun running through some unarmed combat drills on the parade ground below. ‘Cadet Maklin. What do you know of the Ruinous Powers?’

I swear the sudden silence was so profound, as ten pairs of eyes stared at me in horrified astonishment, that I found myself wondering if they’d stopped breathing.

Maklin’s mouth worked like a freshly landed fish for a moment. ‘They’re really, really bad?’ he hazarded at length.

‘Correct,’ I told him. ‘But it’s their human acolytes you have to look out for.’ I hesitated for a moment, then decided not to burden them with any more knowledge about the Powers themselves. Emperor knows, it’s hardly the most comfortable thing to be scratching around in your head, and it would hardly help matters to give them all nightmares. ‘They form cults, and try to attract the attention of one of the Powers by furthering whatever they imagine its ends to be. The lucky ones generally just muck about enacting rituals they don’t understand, and start worming their way into positions of influence, where they can disrupt the proper functioning of the Imperium.’

‘What about the unlucky ones?’ Kayla asked.

‘They succeed,’ I told her seriously. ‘Their patron power really does take an interest. Bad news for them, and far worse for everyone else.’

‘But they can be beaten, can’t they?’ Stebbins asked, sounding a little uncertain. ‘You’ve fought them, and won.’

‘A few times,’ I said, deciding to gloss over my encounters with daemons and wyrds. I’d got out in one piece every time, it was true, but a lot of other folk hadn’t, and I’d probably have gone the same way if it wasn’t for Jurgen’s peculiar talent for disrupting any warp-spawned powers in the vicinity. ‘But I’ve always had help, and it was never easy. They can place their people anywhere, even inside the Imperial Guard. I don’t have to tell you how serious that can be.’

‘The Guard?’ Donal, of course. ‘Surely that can’t happen very often.’

‘Hardly ever,’ I said. ‘But I’ve seen entire regiments turn to Chaos before now, fighting for their new masters with just as much tenacity and devotion as they used to do for the Emperor.’ Donal still looked sceptical, but from the expressions of horror and disgust on most of the other faces I could see that they were digesting this new and unwelcome idea.

‘What about their commissars?’ Nelys asked indignantly. ‘Why didn’t they stop them?’

‘They seemed to be a bit too busy being dead,’ I told him. ‘One of the more dubious benefits of our calling is being top of the target list in a mutiny.’ I smiled, bleakly. ‘Which is a very good reason for making sure no one foments one in a regiment you’re attached to.’

Most of them nodded, taking the answer at face value, although I was far from sure it had been the right one in every case. I’d known at least one commissar defect to the Great Enemy, and was morbidly certain that there

must have been others.

‘So how can we tell if there are Chaos cultists among the soldiers we’ve been assigned to?’ Kayla asked, coming to the point before any of the others as usual.

‘There are a number of signs,’ I said, ‘which might indicate cultist infiltration. In particular, look out for any groups forming around veteran warriors which claim to be some kind of battlefield brotherhood, especially if they start showing signs of wanting to get into close combat instead of using their guns...’

By the time lunch rolled around, and almost away again, I’d run my charges through the most obvious scenarios I could think of, and felt it prudent to add a caveat. ‘There are no hard and fast rules where this is concerned,’ I cautioned them. ‘You’ll just have to rely on your instincts.’

‘I don’t think I’ve got any,’ Nelys said seriously, allowing everyone to break the tension with a laugh, which left him looking faintly bewildered.

‘You followed your instincts on the asteroid,’ Kayla reminded him. ‘That seemed to work out all right.’

‘Yes, I suppose it did,’ Nelys conceded, his expression so serious that even I couldn’t quite suppress a smile.

Donal frowned, thoughtfully. ‘It’s all very well telling us what to look out for in a compromised Guard regiment,’ he said. ‘But surely they’re one of the least likely institutions to be infiltrated.’

‘Quite right,’ I conceded. ‘Normally you’ll find Chaos cults active among the civilian population. Where they can, they’ll try and subvert PDF units and the local arbites,²² too. For obvious reasons.’

‘Well, I suppose they’ll be someone else’s problem in any case,’ Donal said, shrugging. ‘We won’t be mixing too much with civilians.’

‘Apart from R&R,’ Frister said, watching a couple of kitchen maids not much older than he was undulating past below us, with a faintly wistful expression on his face. For a moment I considered counselling caution there too, mindful of the bordello I’d stumbled across on Keffia, which had turned out to be staffed with genestealer hybrids, then decided against it. I’d probably give the poor lad a complex or something. Kinder to let him dream; after all, it was the closest he was ever likely to get.

‘What do you make of it, Cain?’ Rorkins asked, narrowing his slate-grey eyes over the fan of cards in his hand, as he tried to work out whether I was

really holding the pair of Inquisitors, which would give me the pot.

Too seasoned a tarot player to let my expression betray me, I simply shrugged, and lobbed another couple of coins onto the heap in the middle of the table. 'Frakked if I know,' I admitted, honestly enough. 'I'm sure the rumours are exaggerated, but they don't seem to be going away.'

I reached for the glass of the well-matured amasec the colonel kept for his more favoured guests, which I'd left within easy reach, and sipped at it. The room was a pleasant one; Rorkins's quarters were neat, and comfortably furnished, with a view across the darkening valley to the far distant peaks, where the setting sun was tinting the snow-shrouded tips a shade of red which reminded me rather too uncomfortably of clotting blood.

'Were you expectin' 'em to?' Visiter asked, permitting a faintly knowing smirk to twitch his moustache as he called my bluff, and matched the fresh wager.

'Not really,' I admitted. 'Not this quickly anyway.' Less than a month had gone by since Brasker had first brought the rumours of a new Black Crusade to my attention. 'But I'd have expected some kind of official rebuttal by now. The longer these stories are permitted to circulate, the more wild and exaggerated they'll become, and the more stirred up the civilians will get.' I shrugged again. 'I've seen it all before. If the Governor doesn't do something about it soon, they'll be rioting in the streets.'

'They already are,' Sister Julien said, glancing up from her cards just long enough to raise the stakes again. I'd been surprised to see her when I'd arrived in Rorkins's rooms for our regular tarot evening: she'd never attended one before, and I'd always assumed she'd disapprove of gambling on principle, but she certainly didn't play like a novice. If anything, she was as good as I was, which was an interesting challenge, to say the least; I'd got so used to having things my own way over the card table that the novelty of having to really work at winning was rather an enjoyable one. 'Or at least they're about to. I was in Havendown yesterday, for mass at the cathedral, and the tribunes²³ had rapid response teams deployed all over the capital.'

'Sounds like a reasonable precaution,' Rorkins said, deciding to fold after all.

'It was more than a precaution, if you ask me,' Julien said, knocking back her tumbler of amasec rather more briskly than such a fine example of the distiller's art deserved, and looking pointedly at the decanter. Taking the

hint, Rorkins stood, and refreshed her glass. ‘The confessor preached a sermon about the need for faith in hard times, and the sin of sedition.’

‘Sounds like business as usual to me,’ Visiter said, his hand hesitating over the pile of coins in front of him, and then withdrawing. Perfect. My pot, then, I thought.

‘The salient point being the part about sedition,’ Julien pointed out. ‘He wouldn’t have pulled that topic out of thin air. That sermon was a direct response to the popular mood, believe me.’ She sounded pretty convinced about it, which I found particularly disturbing. She knew the way the Ecclesiarchy worked about as well as I understood the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the Munitorium, and if the sisters were concerned about the effect the rumours were having on civilian morale, that meant things were getting dire indeed. She glanced at me, an implicit challenge, and stretched out a hand towards the pile of currency in the middle of the table. ‘Planning to match that, Cain, or shall I just pick it up here and now?’

‘I think I can do a little better than match it,’ I said easily, raising the stakes again, and she nodded approvingly.

‘I thought you must have picked up that last Inquisitor,’ she said casually, trying to fake me into some kind of tell, but I wasn’t about to be read that easily, so I just smiled in return.

‘I suppose you’ll have to pay to find out,’ I said. I didn’t just have two Inquisitors, there was a Primarch in there as well. It was a strong hand, one of the best I’d had all evening, and I’d won a couple of pots with far weaker.

‘The trouble is,’ Visiter said, ‘no one really knows anythin’. Astropathic communication’s in a hell of a state, with the shadow the hive fleets are castin’ in the warp, and the sector fleet’s pretty much isolated out here. Whatever news is comin’ in by courier boat’s out of date before it even gets to this side of the galaxy.’

‘Well, don’t look at me,’ Julien said. ‘I haven’t heard a thing from the preceptory in months.’ This didn’t seem to strike her as much of a deprivation. ‘Well, trust the Emperor and take a chance, as my old abbess used to say.’ She matched my bet, and turned her cards over. ‘Emperor ascendant. Still think you can beat that, commissar?’

‘Not unless I’ve got another Emperor up my sleeve,’ I said lightly, staring in what I hoped was well-concealed perplexity at the strongest and rarest hand in the game.

Rorkins and Visiter laughed, and the colonel refilled my glass for me. 'I'm not sure praying for a miracle is quite within the spirit of the game,' he said, as Julien scooped up the pot.

'No need to,' the Celestian assured him. 'Sometimes He just provides them regardless.' She shuffled the deck with a dexterity the owner of a downhive gambling den would have envied, and began to deal again. 'I take it you're all still in?'

'Absolutely,' Visiter assured her. 'I'm hopin' to get a bit of that back before you drop it in the poor box.'

'Actually, I was planning to squander it on riotous living,' Julien said, pausing just long enough for the rest of us to start wondering if she was actually being serious before she laughed raucously at our resulting expressions. 'But you're right, it can do a lot more good in the collection plate.' Personally, I disagreed quite strongly with that opinion, and determined to divert as much of it as I could towards her first suggestion before the evening was out, with myself as the main beneficiary.

'Whatever's going on in the Segmentum Obscurus, I don't suppose it's going to affect us directly,' Rorkins said thoughtfully, arranging the cards he'd been dealt, and opening the bidding with a low denomination coin or two. 'Not for a while, anyway.' Which, as things were to turn out, was about as wide of the mark as it was possible to get, although we had no way of knowing that at the time. 'But there's no doubt that we are vulnerable here, particularly if the civilian authorities continue to vacillate.'

'I agree,' I said. I turned my head, taking in the three other faces around the table. 'The four of us are probably the most experienced military personnel on the planet.' All right, I had my reservations about Julien, of course, but I couldn't deny that she'd seen her fair share of action over the years, and it seemed polite to include her.

Visiter nodded sombrely. 'In the entire subsector, more like.' He made another token bet, and glanced speculatively at Rorkins. 'Which means, I take it, that you didn't just invite us here tonight for the tarot.'

'It seemed a reasonable pretext,' the colonel admitted. 'We've got together like this often enough for no one to remark on it.' He nodded cordially at Julien. 'Most of us, anyway. And I'm bound to say that if we'd known you were that good a player, we'd have invited you to join us long ago.'

'A sucker as well as a gentleman,' Julien said, with some amusement. She glanced in my direction. 'Are you in or out, Cain?'

With a sense of mounting trepidation, I threw some more coins in the pot. The palms of my hands were tingling again, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was standing on the brink of a precipice. 'I'm in,' I said easily, masking my true feelings with the ease of a lifetime's dissembling. 'The real question is, into what?' I looked directly at Rorkins as I spoke. 'Because I'd rather not find myself having to choose between friendship and duty.' Not that I'd ever given the proverbial flying one for either, of course, but it was the sort of thing they'd expect me to say, so I thought I ought to say it.

'I would have thought that's obvious,' Rorkins said. 'Contingency planning. If things really do go ploid-shaped in the next few months, we're going to have to be the ones to sort it out.' Well, he was right about that too, although none of us had any idea at the time just how catastrophic a situation we'd find ourselves dealing with.

'That sounds reasonable,' I agreed. At least the schola was reasonably isolated, so in the event of widespread civil unrest we should escape the worst of it. 'It shouldn't be too difficult to defend this place if we have to.' Not against a rabble of rioters, anyway, which at the time was the worst-case scenario I could envisage.

Julien nodded, and made her own bet. 'I've already started teaching my novitiates a few counter-insurgency drills, just to be on the safe side.' She glanced up, and stared at us, trying to read our expressions. 'Oh, come on. Like you three haven't considered something similar.'

'Already doing it,' Rorkins admitted. 'Street fighting and house clearance.' He discarded a couple of cards, considered their replacements, and made another token bet.

'Optimum fleet deployment for the SDF assets we've got,' Visiter said, looking faintly relieved. 'Purely a theoretical exercise, of course.' He replaced a single card, with a studied deliberation, which looked like a bluff to me, and raised the stakes. Everyone looked at me.

'Heretic spotting for beginners,' I said, throwing in five cards of no immediate value, and mildly surprised to find myself receiving the Emperor, an Inquisitor, and another Primarch to reinforce the one I'd decided to hold on to. Emboldened, I made a substantial bet, which left everyone else looking worried, and only Julien decided to match it.

'You think that's the main threat we'll be facing?' she asked seriously, holding on to the cards she already held, which was a faintly ominous sign.

‘It’s the most obvious one,’ I said cautiously, deciding not to mention my paranoid fancies about the chamber in the asteroid. By now I’d managed to convince myself that my fears of a necron tomb up there were no more than that, the simple result of old memories being disturbed in a stressful situation, and that whatever we’d be facing in the weeks to come would be far less terrible. ‘If there are any heretical cults active on Perlia, they’ll be doing all they can to take advantage of the confusion.’

Sure enough, I had the strongest hand, and since no one else seemed inclined to bet, I scooped the somewhat meagre pot.

‘That’s their style, all right,’ Rorkins conceded, pretty much confirming my suspicions about his service record. He looked at me narrowly, as I began to deal the next hand. ‘You think there might be other threats too?’

‘Always,’ I told him, folding the fingers of my right hand down to enumerate them, and trying not to remember the circumstances under which I’d acquired the augmetic ones. ‘The ’nids are all over the sector. The main front may be parsecs away, but Emperor alone knows how many splinter fleets are still out there, and there could still be other pockets of survivors of the last infestation lurking somewhere in system.’ Visiter nodded thoughtfully, so I continued. ‘Not to mention the orks. It’s been a while since any more popped up, but we can’t discount the possibility of another warband emerging somewhere over the isthmus.’ Most of the outbreaks still occurred on the other side of the narrow land bridge connecting us to the eastern continent, where I’d spent such a fraught few months on my first visit to Perlia, and which I’d been careful to travel to as infrequently as possible since taking up residence here. I folded a third finger down. ‘And while we’re considering all the possibilities, what about an opportunistic raid by the tau? They’ve never been slow to take advantage of any instability in the Imperium to expand their own borders.’

‘All possible,’ Rorkins conceded, any pretence of interest in the game completely forgotten. ‘But from what I hear, the tau have as much of a problem with the tyranids as we do.’

Visiter nodded. ‘Accordin’ to some old friends in fleet intelligence, that’s true. Couple of their major septs are under siege, and they’re divertin’ a lot of their resources to dealin’ with that.’ He shrugged. ‘Or they were six months ago. For all I know they’ve been eaten by now, and the little blue blighters are lookin’ around for new worlds to replace ’em.’

‘It still sounds to me as though the heretics are the main problem,’ Julien

said, predictably. This time, though, I found it hard to disagree.

‘The main problem,’ I said, ‘is that right now Perlia couldn’t defend itself against a couple of hrud using harsh language. The PDF has been stripped to the bone replacing the Guard losses against the tyranids.’ It occurred to me, belatedly, that under the circumstances I could have chosen a less graphic metaphor, but there was no point in worrying about that now. Then, in the interests of maintaining a united front, I nodded at Julien. ‘But the sister’s right, the most immediate threat is clearly the one of subversion.’

After that, the conversation got a good deal more general, as we thrashed out a few reasonably practical things we could do, and agreed to meet again the following week to compare progress.

‘The trouble is,’ Rorkins complained, as we said our farewells, ‘we’re going in blind. We need hard information about what we’re facing.’

Well, that wasn’t going to be too long in coming, and when it arrived, it was far from comforting. Certainly, if I’d known then what I was going to learn in the next few days, I’d have returned to my quarters in a far less sanguine state than I did. As it was, though, the evening’s discussion had buoyed my spirits considerably, and I retired for the night still embracing the cosy delusion that disaster might yet be averted.



Editorial Note:

Although Cain has been a little more forthcoming than usual about the wider situation then prevailing on Perlia, he has, as always, concentrated on those aspects of it which he experienced personally. Accordingly, I've appended the following, which may prove enlightening, despite the excessively hagiographic tone of most of the work it's extracted from.

From The Return of the Liberator: Ciaphas Cain and the Second Siege of Perlia by Orten Bassit, 037. M42.

The wider course of the later Tyrannic Wars is far too widely known to require elucidation here, but it's no exaggeration to say that those momentous events had a profound effect on Perlia, despite its good fortune in being so well removed from the main areas of conflict. Surely no citizen of our Emperor-blessed globe can feel anything but pride in the celerity with which its people answered the Imperium's call to arms, and the speed and efficiency with which regiment after regiment of the Planetary Defence Force was inducted into the Imperial Guard and dispatched to the front.

Inevitably, those forces left behind were stretched to the limit, but managed to prevail regardless when the fearsome foe so unexpectedly arrived in our own fair stellar system. Nevertheless, repulsing them cost Perlia dear, in the thousands of lives of PDF troopers and SDF crewmen, leaving her ramshackle defences weakened still further.

Serious as these events were, however, the real crisis had yet to become apparent; and, to be fair, there was no real reason why it should, since it had its roots in events that were occurring almost the entire galaxy away. Even

so, had it not been for the fortuitous return of Ciaphas Cain, the hero of the first siege, at just the right time, things would undoubtedly have gone very badly indeed for Perlia in the next few months.

As so often where the machinations of the Great Enemy are concerned, the first intimations of the onslaught to come were not the cannonades of the Traitor Legions, but the insidious rumour-mongering which so sapped public morale, and must surely have been the work of a cabal of traitors lurking within our midst.

Initial word of the Black Crusade spread across the galaxy as fast as the warp could carry it, first arriving on Perlia some time around 400, 999. M41. At this point, those appointed to carry out the Emperor's wishes in His holy name could still have reined in the wild and uninformed speculation which did so much to erode the spirits of the populace, but to the surprise and growing dismay of His most loyal subjects, the Governor and his staff remained silent on the matter, along with the most senior adepts of the Administratum and the general staff of the PDF. The most charitable interpretation of this almost inexplicable dereliction of duty is that they were so concerned with the course of the Tyrannic War that they barely noticed what must have seemed a minor distraction at home, although subsequent events were to prove just how wrong they were if that was indeed the case. Given how things unfolded over the next few months, however, it's far more probable that some, at least, had their own, more sinister reasons for allowing the unrest to continue, if not actively encouraging it behind the scenes.

Fortunately for Perlia, Commissar Cain had been far from idle, already anticipating the crisis bearing down on us all, and had taken the first steps towards dealing with the situation on his own, more honourable terms. Indeed it was he who obtained the first reliable information about what was facing us, and lost no time in acting on it.



SIX

There's an old Valhallan proverb, which I first heard back in my days with the 12th Field Artillery,²⁴ which quite accurately states that 'things can always get worse.' Indeed, I sometimes feel that my entire career has been little more than a practical demonstration of the adage, although it's seldom proven quite so comprehensively true as it was about to on this occasion.

Almost a week had gone by since our first clandestine council of war, and although none of us was sufficiently indiscreet to mention it, or any of the matters we'd discussed, when we encountered one another around the schola, it was more than evident that my co-conspirators were becoming as edgy as I was. The rumours continued to fly, the general populace was getting steadily more restive, and beyond trying to ensure that a relative handful of callow youths were a little more prepared for the gathering storm, there still seemed to be nothing we could do about it.

That may seem a little strange, I suppose, given my ridiculously inflated reputation among the Perlans; I could certainly have marched into the Governor's palace and demanded an audience, or descended on the high command of the PDF like the wrath of the Emperor, and started trying to get the imbeciles there to take the matter more seriously, but caution held me back. If the unrest really was being orchestrated by a secretive cabal of Chaos sympathisers among the ruling oligarchy, then letting them know we suspected their existence would be unwise in the extreme. At the very least they'd try to hinder what little good we'd be able to do by exerting their influence against us, and at the worst they'd resort to more direct methods; I'd already survived enough assassination attempts for one lifetime, and had no wish to fend off any more.

'Ah, sister,' Rorkins said, nodding courteously to Julien as she walked past

the table we were occupying together in the faculty lounge, Brasker at her heels, droning on about the dismal decline in the standard of third level aspirants in his usual pedantic monotone. 'We were just wondering if you'd care to join us for another card game tomorrow evening.'

'Why not?' She nudged the bundle of data-slates under her arm to a more comfortable position, pausing to talk to us, while Brasker shifted from foot to foot like a servitor caught between conflicting instructions. After a moment he inclined his head politely and greeted us by name, before subsiding into uncharacteristic silence. 'Your quarters again?'

'I believe it's my turn to be the host,' I said. We generally took it in turns, and Jurgen's almost preternatural talent for scrounging meant that we'd be tolerably well fed during our deliberations, however futile they might turn out to be.

'Sounds fine to me,' Julien agreed. 'I'd offer to have you round myself, but tongues might wag.' She grinned at Brasker, who seemed completely unaware of the joke at his expense. 'Same time as last week?'

'If it suits you,' I said. After a few more pleasantries the two of them moved away, and left Rorkins and I to our mid-morning recaf. We continued to converse for a while in a desultory fashion, our thoughts on far more weighty matters than the ones we discussed for appearances' sake, until a small and odoriferous altercation by the door informed me that Jurgen was in no mood to abide by the general convention that only tutors and the housekeeping staff were admitted to these chambers.

'It's all right,' I soothed the small comet tail of agitated timewasters jabbering and gesticulating in his wake, 'he's with me.' Something they were all no doubt aware of in any case, since he was never exactly inconspicuous, however hard you tried, and had been infesting the schola for as long as I had. Satisfied that if they couldn't ignore his presence, even with the window open, at least he was someone else's responsibility now, they scuttled back to their own concerns, while Jurgen handed me a data-slate, his expression sour.

'Message for you, sir. Marked personal.' He glared around the room, as though anyone else who stood between him and his duty was little better than an ork, and just about as expendable. 'And urgent.'

'I see. Thank you.' I took the slate and scanned the contents. After a moment I looked up, catching Rorkins's eye, and nodded almost imperceptibly. 'I think this might go some way towards clearing up that

little difficulty you mentioned after the last tarot game.’ Which was about as explicit as I wanted to get, surrounded as we were by listening ears.

Astute enough to have come to the same conclusion, Rorkins simply nodded in response. ‘I’m glad to hear it,’ he said. ‘Not bad news, I hope.’

‘Far from it,’ I told him, feeling the first faint stirrings of optimism in several days. ‘It’s a dinner invitation.’

Under the circumstances I felt able to prevail upon Visiter to provide me with the use of the Aquila, and a pilot to go with it. To my pleasant surprise the pilot he’d assigned turned out to be Sprie, who confirmed the favourable impression I’d formed of him on our eventful foray to the mining hab with a swift and thorough cockpit check, which left him sufficiently occupied for the commodore and I to hold a quick conversation on the landing pad without the risk of being overheard.

‘He’s a good lad,’ Visiter confirmed. ‘Best pilot in the whole bunch. More to the point, though, he’s bright enough to keep his mouth shut about anythin’ you ask him to.’ Which might prove necessary at that. I hadn’t been entirely honest with my fellow conspirators, you see, telling them only that I was dining with a rogue trader of my acquaintance. As you can imagine, that little titbit of news swept the campus from end to end (thanks in no small part to Brasker, who I’d made sure was close enough to overhear the end of my conversation with Rorkins); only Jurgen, Visiter, and now Sprie, knew that I was meeting him aboard his ship.

What no one else apart from Jurgen knew, and I was quite determined to keep it that way, was that Orelus was far more than a simple merchant; he was another of Amberley’s agents, gathering information from across half the segmentum on her behalf. If anyone in the sector knew what was really going on, it would undoubtedly be him. Of course his arrival here was hardly likely to be a coincidence, which was also an encouraging sign; slapping down heretics wasn’t exactly Amberley’s speciality, but I was sure she had a few contacts among the Ordo Hereticus in whose laps she could drop the problem once I’d made her aware of it.²⁵

His checks complete, Sprie boosted us smoothly from the ground, lifting us into orbit with an ease even Jurgen would have had little to complain about had I decided to bring him along. I have to admit to a sense of pleasurable anticipation as the familiar gilded pinnacles of the *Lucre Foedus* rolled past the viewport, and the welcoming maw of the mighty

vessel's main hangar bay loomed ahead. Amberley, I knew, was unlikely to be aboard, generally preferring to make use of her own yacht, the *Externus Exterminatus*, to flit around the galaxy, but even the remote possibility that she might be was enough to trigger some pleasant reveries, which occupied my mind to the exclusion of practically everything else. I was only recalled to business as we passed through the main hangar doors, vast slabs of orichalcum chased with gold filigree, and Sprie cut in the retros, settling us as gently as a piece of windblown thistledown in the middle of the landing area marked out by a score or so of deckhands waving hand-held luminators.

'My dear Cain. A pleasure to see you again,' Orelus greeted me as I stepped off the boarding ramp, his cadaverous appearance and aquiline nose as prominent as they had been the first time we'd met, although, like myself, he was sporting a touch of grey in the hair these days, and he'd acquired an impressive scar on his right cheek since I'd last set eyes on him. He was still just as enamoured of gaudy clothing as he'd ever been, however, a pair of crimson hose visible beneath a bright yellow tunic, over which an open mesh cape of spun gold had been casually thrown.

'Orelus. I could say the same,' I replied, trying not to feel too let down by Amberley's obvious absence. That aside, I was perfectly sincere in the compliment, as his company was always pleasurable, and his hospitality generous. Although it had been some considerable time since we'd seen each other, we fell easily and naturally into a companionable gait, strolling side by side across the echoing plain of metal, chatting amiably about our respective adventures in the interim, both being careful from long habit not to say too much before we reached the seclusion of his quarters.

As we passed a line of heavy cargo shuttles, which dwarfed the *Aquila* now parked at the end of the row, I raised an eyebrow in polite enquiry. All were armed, and several showed the scars of recent combat. 'Someone ask for their money back?' I asked.

'Not this time,' Orelus replied, any further remarks he might have been about to make drowned out by the rapping of boot-heels against the deck plates as an honour guard of his household troops came smartly to attention. Having been in action alongside them more than once, I knew better than to let the gaudy livery they wore fool me into underestimating them. Most were Imperial Guard veterans, and many possessed special skills of quite staggering lethality. I nodded to a couple of faces I recognised, who were

too well disciplined to return the greeting, but who no doubt appreciated the courtesy, and spoke their names as I passed. As I tell the young pups I've been trying to lick into shape, it always helps to let the troopers think you care about them as individuals, not just a faceless mass: believe me, when the las-bolts start flying, that sense of connection is going to save your neck.

We passed from the hangar bay into a carpeted corridor, where little knots of people scurried to and fro on the mysterious errands ship crew always seem to be engaged in, and marble busts of people I didn't recognise lined the tapestried walls on waist-high plinths.

'Your man not with you?' Orelus enquired, no doubt surprised at Jurgen's absence.

'Not this time,' I said. 'Under the circumstances, I thought it best to leave him in place.'

With the situation on Perlia still so unstable, I wanted him where he could keep his ear to the ground, and notify me at once if anything happened. Rorkins and the others were good enough allies, of course, but I couldn't bring myself to trust any of them to the extent I would Jurgen, or rely on them to cover my back in quite the same way. After almost a century of soldiering together, the rapport we shared was second to none. Besides which, I knew that Orelus occasionally made use of sanctioned psykers, and if any of them were likely to be around, the secret of my aide's abilities would prove almost impossible to keep.

'Probably just as well,' Orelus agreed, standing aside to usher me into his personal apartments. They were just as richly decorated as I recalled from previous visits, scarlet hangings ornamented with his family crest obscuring most of the metal bulkheads, which had been gilded and polished to a rich lustre, making the room feel curiously as though it had been flooded with honey. I'd always found the display of ostentation rather vulgar, to be honest, and was quietly relieved when the trader carried on through the formal reception rooms to the cosier environs of the parlour beyond, where he liked to relax when he wasn't trying to impress some chinless piece of backwater nobility. 'You might want to talk to the Navigator a bit later on.'

That I rather doubted, as I've yet to meet a member of the Navis Nobilite I didn't have an almost irresistible urge to shoot on sight. I know they're a necessary evil, and the Imperium could barely function without them, but anyone who is more at home in the warp than the real world is a bit too

close to the Great Enemy for my liking. Besides, they're arrogant, condescending snobs, and those are the ones who are making an effort to get along with you. Nevertheless I let the matter go, and merely nodded in reply.

Orelus's inner sanctum was surprisingly cosy, with wood panelling on the walls, and a dark blue carpet, almost the same colour as the oceans of Perlia, which could be glimpsed through the wide viewport at one end of the room. Without that somewhat vertiginous reminder, it would have been easy to forget we were aboard a starship at all.

'You've heard the rumours, I take it?' I asked him as we sat, and my host lifted the lids from a battery of chafing dishes cluttering the table. That alone told me how sensitive he expected our conversation to become: even his most trusted servants were being excluded from the room while we talked.

'Which ones?' Orelus asked, helping himself to some cottleston pie, while I poured a large goblet of whichever wine he'd chosen to accompany our meal, and found it as excellent as I'd expected.

'The whole planet's buzzing with them,' I told him. 'About a new Black Crusade. Absurdly exaggerated, of course, but the local authorities are just sitting on their hands instead of issuing a denial, which just makes things worse. If somebody doesn't do something soon, there's going to be so much civil unrest the Governor will need to call in the sector fleet to restore order.'

'The sector fleet's got its hands full already,' Orelus told me, to my complete lack of surprise. 'The main thrust of the tyrannid advance has diverted towards ork-held space for some reason,²⁶ but there are enough of them left on the fringes to keep most of our assets pinned down for the foreseeable future.' He shrugged, accepting a goblet of wine, which I handed to him as he spoke. 'But right now that looks like the least of your worries.'

'The rumours are true, then,' I said, a statement rather than a question, and Orelus nodded.

'I'm afraid so,' he confirmed, a trifle indistinctly around a mouthful of pie. 'The Traitor Legions attacked in force some months ago, trying to force passage through the Cadian Gate. Enough of them are getting through to make things very difficult in the Segmentum Obscurus.'

'But that's half the galaxy away,' I said, tucking in to the tempting array of

viands on offer in front of me, although my appetite was considerably less keen than it had been a moment ago. 'I don't see how that can affect us here.' Actually I could, because it was precisely the topic I'd been discussing with Rorkins and the others, but I was still hoping desperately that Orelus was about to reassure me that the situation was being contained. 'Other than the resources being diverted to deal with it weakening our defences against the tyranids, of course.'

'Most of the fighting's been confined to the Obscurus so far,' Orelus confirmed, idly dismissing about a quarter of the galaxy as though it were a single cohesive lump, 'but the enemy raiding fleets are getting bolder. Several have been ranging farther afield.' He paused, picking at a palovine pastry, waiting for me to draw the obvious conclusion.

'Ranging in this direction,' I said, taking his meaning at once.

Orelus nodded. 'There's a whole flotilla heading this way, as fast as the warp can carry them. And that's pretty fast at the moment; according to our Navigator, there are currents flowing out of the Eye stronger than any he's ever seen.'

'Even so,' I said, feeling the old familiar chill of foreboding, 'there must be plenty of other easy targets between them and us.'

'You'd think so,' Orelus agreed. 'But they don't seem to be slowing down much.' He touched a large emerald on the thick bracelet around his wrist, and a hidden hololith hummed into life, projecting a flickering image of the galaxy into the empty space above the table. A line appeared, originating in the Eye of Terror, and heading unmistakably in our direction. Orelus waved a hand through the insubstantial projection, indicating several stellar systems close to the crimson smear. 'They've bypassed these systems entirely, even though they were obviously sitting ducks, with little or no effective defences.'

'That doesn't sound like any Chaos raiders I've ever seen,' I said. Normally the weaker the targets the better from their point of view, just like the cowardly scum they are. I pointed to a couple of contact icons along the line of the enemy's progress. 'But they fought here and here.'

'They did.' Orelus nodded, looking grave. 'Fought and won. Which simply shouldn't have happened.' He expanded the image, overlaying the contested systems with battlefield data I found myself reluctant to believe. 'They were outnumbered and outgunned on each occasion. At Madasa they were even faced with an entire convent of Adepta Sororitas, which fell

within the hour.'

'That's impossible,' I said. Emperor knows, I had little enough time for the psalm-singing harpies in the normal course of events, but I'd seen them hold their ground tenaciously against almost impossible odds on several occasions. 'They'd have fought to the last woman.'

'They seem to have fought, all right.' Orelus's voice was grim. 'They fought for the enemy.' Then, as if realising how absurd the accusation sounded, a faintly defensive tone entered his voice. 'So far as I've been able to determine, anyway. There were sporadic reports of what sounded like a formation of battle-sisters engaging one of the last PDF units to fall.'

'Misdirection and propaganda,' I said decisively.

Orelus nodded slowly. 'I hope you're right,' he said, sounding far from convinced. 'At any event, the Madasa system is now firmly under enemy control, and resisting all the attempts of the Astartes to reclaim it.' He returned the hololith to its original view, and extended the red line from its final position. As I'd expected, it intersected the Perlia system, before disappearing somewhere into the blank space chewed into the heart of the Imperium by the advance of the hive fleets.

'Maybe they want something from the tyranids,' I suggested, failing to convince even myself.

'Maybe they do,' Orelus said, throwing me that small crumb of comfort, before adding, 'but I doubt it.'

'So do I,' I agreed. 'In which case, it's pretty obvious what they're coming after.' Being an agent of the Ordo Xenos, I was sure Orelus was well aware of the clandestine Inquisition research facility in the Valley of Daemons, somewhere under the wisps of cloud trailing over the eastern continent of the gently rotating globe beyond the viewport.

'The Shadowlight,' he confirmed. 'Inquisitor Vail is of the opinion that Abaddon, or, more likely, one of his lackeys wanting to curry favour with him, has somehow learned of its existence. If that's the case, then its removal from Perlia before the enemy arrives becomes of paramount importance.' Which was a major understatement. I hadn't set eyes on the cursed thing for more than sixty-five years, but the memory of it was still enough to send a shiver down my spine.

I nodded. 'I take it that's why you're here,' I said.

'Quite.' Orelus echoed the gesture. 'We still don't know where it came from, or what it's really supposed to do, but we do know from Killian's

researches that it can turn latent psykers into powerful active ones.'

'Not something I'm likely to forget,' I said, suppressing a shudder at the memory. The rogue inquisitor had intended using the thing in an insane attempt to mass produce psykers, hoping to beat the forces of Chaos at their own game, which still seemed like burning down the house to get rid of the termites to me. Luckily he'd ended up messily dead in the nick of time, allowing Amberley to snaffle the thing and send it back to where it came from, which was now roughly a hundred kilometres below my feet and a bit to the left. If the forces of Chaos succeeded in getting hold of it, though, I had no doubt that they'd carry on where the late and unlamented Killian had left off, leaving us up to our ears in wyrds. That simply couldn't be allowed to happen.

'I take it you've got the blasted thing safely stowed away in your most secure hold by now?' I asked, and Orelus shook his head.

'I wish we did. But there's a problem.'

'There always is,' I said, trying not to sound bitter about it. I nibbled at one of the delicacies on my plate, but for all the pleasure I was able to take in it, it might as well have been a standard ration bar. 'What kind of a problem?'

'The magi staffing the facility have recovered several more artefacts in the last few decades,' Orelus told me soberly. 'They're now working on the assumption that the Shadowlight is part of a more complex mechanism, which they've spent a number of years attempting to assemble. Apparently, dismantling it now would be an affront to the Ommissiah, or some such foolery. I've been trying to impress upon them that letting Abaddon stroll off with it would be a damn sight worse, but you know what tech-priests are like. It's going to take a while to persuade them to let me pack the thing up and go.'

I nodded again, and sipped at the wine, letting its heady fragrance calm the alarm bells shrilling in my head. This was a complication I suppose I should have foreseen; the research facility in the Valley of Daemons was a joint operation between the Ordo Xenos and the Adeptus Mechanicus, and I'd gathered from Amberley that the partnership was sometimes a strained one. The tech-priests manning the place eighty years ago had told Killian to go frot himself when he tried to pull rank on them, despite his Inquisitorial status;²⁷ unfortunately for them he wasn't the kind to take no for an answer, came back with an army, and grabbed the thing over their gently steaming

corpses. 'Are you making any headway at all?' I asked.

'A little,' Orelus said. 'I've been able to persuade them to let me have copies of all their data, at least. But that's not going to be a whole lot of use if Abaddon's got the device itself.'

'I suppose not.' I shook my head sympathetically. 'Which reminds me.' I took a data-slate from my pocket, and laid it on the table. 'This is all the intelligence I've been able to collate since the last time I saw Amberley.'

'I'll see that she gets it,' Orelus promised, not quite managing to mask his unease at my casual use of Amberley's given name. It was hardly news to him, or anyone else among her associates, that we shared a personal relationship beyond the merely professional, but for some reason none of them liked to be reminded of it.

'Thank you,' I said. After some deliberation I'd decided to mention my feelings of disquiet about the mining station in the report, despite the near certainty that Amberley would simply dismiss them as the paranoid imaginings I'd almost succeeded in convincing myself they actually were. Necrons weren't exactly subtle, in my experience, and if they really were taking an interest in Perlia, I was morbidly certain that we'd have known about it by now. With an effort, I returned my attention to the main topic of conversation. 'How long do you think it will take to convince them?'

'Not too long, I hope,' Orelus said, smiling mirthlessly. It never occurred to either of us that he wouldn't get his own way in the end; rogue traders are notoriously tough negotiators. Neither of us was crass enough to verbalise the obvious thought that, if push came to shove, he probably had enough firepower aboard to repeat Killian's solution to the problem. That might get the Shadowlight to safety, but wouldn't do a lot to keep the Mechanicus on side once the immediate crisis was past. 'I imagine they'll see sense once the enemy gets close enough.'

'Any idea how long that'll take?' I asked, a small knot of tension winding itself around my gut as I spoke.

Orelus shrugged. 'About a week, I think, at least so far as the main fleet goes.' He pulled a data-slate from the pocket of his tunic, and handed it to me. 'This contains the best estimate I can give you of their strength and numbers, but I should warn you, it's highly conjectural.'

'It's better than nothing,' I replied grimly, stowing it in the pocket of my greatcoat. I'd show it to Rorkins and the others, and with any luck we'd be able to devise a strategy or two we could take to the PDF. Potentially

compromised or not, they were the only thing standing between Perlia and annihilation now, and the sooner this information got to them, the better our chances of holding the planet.

There was also the distinctly tempting possibility that, since Orelus was here to retrieve the Shadowlight, I could come up with a plausible-sounding reason in the next day or two for leaving along with it. As far as I knew, Jurgen was still the only man capable of handling the thing without extensive precautions, and our previous experience was bound to prove valuable in keeping it safe.

‘I hope it helps.’ Orelus might have said more, but before he got the chance, the picture in the hololith flickered and changed. The slash across the galaxy, like a bloody claw mark, vanished, to be replaced by a view of the Perlia system. I quickly identified the runes marking our own position in orbit, and, with a vertiginous lurch to my stomach, a scatter of icons marking an enemy contact.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt your supper, my lord,’ the voice of the vessel’s captain said, issuing from some artfully concealed vox-unit, ‘but we have warp portals forming throughout the system. The enemy seem to have been less tardy than we hoped.’



Editorial Note:

Cain's account of what happened next is, quite understandably, somewhat incomplete. Accordingly, another brief extract from a more dispassionate and authoritative source seems appropriate at this juncture.

From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127. M42.

By the merest good fortune, the first incursion by the heretical fleet met much stiffer resistance than it expected. The trading vessel *Lucre Foedus* had put into Perlia shortly before their arrival, and was riding at anchor in the skies above Havendown as the scouting flotilla emerged from the warp. How they reacted to this unwelcome surprise, we can only conjecture, for the ships of our Rogue Traders are formidable indeed, designed as they are for venturing beyond the bounds of the Imperium, and the Emperor's unfailing protection.

No doubt those in command of the raiding force felt that a handful of destroyers would be sufficient to sweep the remaining system defence boats from the skies, and had that been all that stood between them and the helpless world below, they might even have been right. But the *Lucre Foedus* was made of sterner stuff, destroying or crippling most of the incoming fleet, before sustaining so much damage herself that she was forced to withdraw.

A persistent local legend, that Ciaphas Cain himself was aboard the ship during the engagement, can safely be discounted, although he was certainly prominent in the ground action which followed, as the surviving forces of

Chaos arrived on the surface of Perlia, to face whatever defences could be mobilised against them.

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SEVEN

‘I’m afraid we’re going to have to cut our meal a little short,’ Orelus said, standing as he spoke, and leading the way out of the parlour. Not for the first time I found myself marvelling at his self-possession. I’ve no doubt most men in his position would have been gibbering with panic at this point, or running round in little circles waving their arms in the air. I probably would have been myself, if I hadn’t had so much practice at appearing calm in a crisis, which pretty much goes with the job, of course.

‘Rather a shame,’ I responded instead, determined to seem no less phlegmatic than my host. ‘Your chef seems as skilful as ever.’ I tapped the comm-bead in my ear. ‘Sprie, we’re leaving early. The enemy has been rather inconsiderate in the timing of their arrival.’

‘We’ll be sure to convey your displeasure,’ Orelus assured me, as we regained the corridor leading back towards the hangar, and, in the other direction, the bridge. ‘Our gun crews can generally be relied on to get the message across.’

‘I’ll leave you to it, then,’ I said, as we halted in preparation for going our separate ways. I’ve been involved in space battles before, of course, one particularly memorable example preceding my first arrival on Perlia, but I’ve always felt they’re no place for a soldier. I’d far rather face the enemy with solid ground under my feet, and preferably a lot of solid cover to hide behind as well.

‘That would be best,’ Orelus agreed. ‘If we can’t get the Shadowlight to safety, you’re the only hope we have of keeping it out of Abaddon’s hands.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ I said, hoping the stark terror twisting my bowels wasn’t visible on my face, and taking automatic refuge in the kind of understated resolve he’d expect me to respond with. ‘But I’m sure you’ll see this rabble

off without too much trouble.'

'I hope so,' he said, sounding far from certain. 'We've as much firepower as a cruiser, and most of the contacts seemed small for warships. But if we take too much damage we'll have to run for it.'

I nodded grimly, having come to the same conclusion myself. If Orelus couldn't recover the Shadowlight, it was vital that he get the information he'd picked up from the Valley of Daemons to Amberley; that way, if the worst came to the worst, at least the Inquisition would have some idea of what it was facing. Of course in the meantime I'd be stuck in the firing line, trying to stop an army of Chaos fanatics from getting their hands on the blasted thing, but that was a problem for later; right now I just wanted to get back to Perlia before the shooting started. 'Emperor be with you,' I said simply, actually meaning it for once, and turned towards the hangar bay with a wave of farewell, trying not to wonder if I'd ever see him again.

Sprie, I was pleased to discover, was just as on top of things as Visiter had led me to expect, waiting in the cockpit with the boarding ramp down and the Aquila's engines already fired up, ready to leave. Indeed, the ramp had begun to rise even before I'd reached the top of it, and the rugged little shuttle had risen from the deck before the atmosphere seals had finished hissing into place behind me.

'Good work, Sprie,' I encouraged him, as I entered the cockpit and dropped into the seat Visiter had occupied during the eventful training run to the asteroid station. If he was surprised to see me there, rather than riding in the back like passengers were supposed to, he was too polite or busy to mention the fact; but if we were about to be shot at, I wanted to be able to see what was trying to kill me. 'A textbook dust-off.'

'Except nobody's shooting at us,' Sprie replied, sounding a little disappointed about it. Well, there was plenty of time for that to change. He fed a little more power to the engines, and we began to glide smoothly towards the huge brazen portal ahead, through which a widening strip of eternal night, speckled with stars, was beginning to show. As we passed through it, and into open space, I noticed shadows on the hull plates, moving parallel to our own, and glanced up to see a squadron of the heavy shuttles I'd noticed before flitting around the enormous bulk of the trading vessel like flies around a grox, forming an unmistakable defensive screen. They'd be no match for real fighters, of course, but they'd be able to pick off incoming ordnance and boarding pods neat as you please, and I nodded

thoughtfully, pleased to see that none of Orelus's people seemed to have lost their edge.

'Goodbye, and good luck,' Orelus's voice said in my comm-bead, echoing slightly, and the mighty vessel's main engines ignited, powering her up and out of the gravity well of Perlus with the casual ease of a man shrugging off a soggy rain cape.

'The Emperor protects,' I responded automatically, hoping that in this instance it would turn out to be true.

'They're engaging,' Sprue said, a moment or two later.

I glanced at the auspex screen, trying to make sense of the overall tactical picture. As always when fighting in space was concerned, I found myself momentarily disorientated, until my brain added the third dimension missing from battles on the surface of a planet. Three of the enemy vessels seemed to be closing on the *Lucre Foedus*, or perhaps it was the other way round, while two more bored in towards the planet below. At any event, Orelus must have fired first, as the leading Chaos vessel abruptly vanished from the screen.

'First blood to us, then,' I said. I was distracted from observing the rest of the fight by a rising babble of panicked voices on just about every frequency my earpiece was capable of picking up, as the shambolic remnants of the PDF finally noticed we were under attack.²⁸

'Back to the schola, sir?' Sprue asked, and I shook my head.

'No,' I instructed him. 'Head for Havendown.' If someone didn't do something to get the rabble down there organised, the enemy would simply stroll in and take the place, which would make my life intensely difficult, not to say short, probably.

'Aye aye, sir.' The flame-haired cadet bent over his instrumentation for a moment, plotting the optimum flight path, then looked up, grinning. 'This should be interesting, anyway.'

'Interesting how?' I asked.

A cluster of tiny dots was closing on the pair of enemy vessels, which had slipped past Orelus, and Sprue nodded at the auspex screen with an expression of tolerant amusement. 'There go our fighters,' he said. 'Swallowing the bait, just like they were supposed to.'

'What bait?' I asked, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck begin to prickle. The hull of our shuttle shook, almost imperceptibly, as if sensing my unease, although the rational part of my mind recognised the sensation

as simply the first kiss of the thickening atmosphere against the fuselage.

‘The system defence boats are all on the outer picket lines,’ Sprie reminded me, ‘in case the ’nids come back. These ships emerged well within the defensive perimeter.’ He shook his head. ‘Way too close to our gravity well for safety: they must be mad.’

‘Of course they are,’ I replied testily, ‘they’re Chaos-worshipping loonies. So far as they’re concerned, self-preservation’s something that only happens to other people. What did you mean about the fighters?’

‘They were the only defensive assets we had capable of engaging them,’ Sprie said. ‘So of course they went rushing off to do just that. Leaving nothing inside the atmosphere to intercept the landing craft.’

‘What landing craft?’ I asked, already beginning to make sense of the approaching vessels’ trajectory.

Sprie shrugged. ‘The ones they’ll be launching any moment now, just as soon as the flyboys start their attack runs against the carriers. They’ll break off when they realise they’ve been suckered, of course, but by that time the barges will be well into the atmosphere, and they’ll never catch up before they hit the deck. Pretty slick, when you come to think about it.’

I nodded. The lad may still only have been a cadet, but he clearly had a sound grasp of three-dimensional tactics, and I wasn’t too proud to defer to his greater expertise. Not with my neck on the line. ‘What about the ships?’ I asked. The thought of a pair of uncontested warships in orbit, able to take pot-shots at anything that took their fancy, was far from comforting.

‘They’re not going anywhere,’ Sprie said, sounding pleased at the thought. ‘This is a suicide run.’ Glancing at the auspex again, I could see he was right. They should have been braking by now, preparing to enter orbit, but they simply continued to descend, following us into the outer reaches of the atmosphere. ‘They were probably hoping to slingshot round the planet, but the fighters must have inflicted some damage to their engines. They’d be the obvious targets.’

I nodded again, having gathered as much from the chatter in my comm-bead. ‘They have,’ I confirmed, and Sprie grinned with vindictive satisfaction.

‘Then they’ll burn or they’ll bounce,’ he said. In the event, it seemed, they did both; hardly had a cluster of smaller dots broken from the nearer contact than both ships hit the denser air above us, dipping within it to blaze across the sky like twin meteors, trailing a shower of lesser sparks as hull plates

and external mounts tore loose and vaporised. 'Hang on, this is going to get rough.'

Forewarned, I gripped the crash webbing in the nick of time, an instant before the shockwave hit, crashing through the boiling air like a tsunami. Our gallant little shuttle bounced like a pea in a drum, and I found myself blessing Visiter for his foresight in assigning this particular pilot to me. Remaining methodical and calm, he worked the controls like a concert meister at a clavichord, gradually restoring our flight path to something reasonably straight and level. As he levelled off, I glanced out of the windshield ahead of us, and winced involuntarily; we were far closer to the ground than we had been, purple moorland and cultivated fields flicking past almost too fast to be seen as anything other than a parti-coloured blur, and the memory of my first arrival on this world rose up to haunt me.

'Good piloting,' I commended him, and Sprie shook his head grimly.

'We're not down yet, sir. Some of the flight systems took an awful battering.' He started paging down a cogitator screen, muttering the litany of fault diagnosis, and I glanced at the auspex again. Both Chaos vessels had re-emerged from the atmosphere, and were now spinning away on an uncontrolled trajectory, no doubt melted to slag by their fiery passage through the superheated air.²⁹ More to distract myself from the implications of his ominous words than anything else, I tried to contact Orelus again, and much to my surprise I succeeded.

'How are you doing?' I asked, as the second of the enemy ships he was engaging vanished from the auspex screen.

'Holding our own, but that's about all,' Orelus said. 'We've lost the starboard batteries and the main fire control systems. We're down to sending the shuttles in, and they're barely making a dent in the last one.'

'Better get out while you can,' I advised reluctantly. According to the chatter in my comm-bead, the system defence boats were inbound, and should be able to deal with the sole surviving intruder. They'd take some time to do it, though, and if the *Lucre Foedus* was destroyed in the interim, the intelligence she was carrying back to Amberley would be lost. On the other hand, if Orelus followed my suggestion, my last chance of getting off Perlia before the enemy arrived in force would go with him.

'I intend to.' The rogue trader's tone was grim. 'We're preparing to make the transit right now. Take care of the Shadowlight, whatever happens.'

'You can count on it,' I assured him insincerely, wondering how in the

Emperor's name I was supposed to do that. Oh well, time enough to worry about it when the time came. A few moments later the blip marking the position of his ship wavered and vanished, leaving his sole surviving opponent in uncontested control of the battlefield. Shortly thereafter it too flickered out of existence, no doubt returning to wherever it had come from, to report that their first attempt to probe our defences hadn't been an entirely unqualified success.

'We're approaching Havendown,' Sprie informed me a moment or two later, the faint tremors I'd already noticed in the Aquila's fuselage beginning to feel a little more pronounced. 'Where do you want to put down?' Despite the increasingly severe problems he was obviously having keeping us in the air at all, his tone was still casual, and I found his obvious confidence reasonably reassuring.

'Head for the PDF headquarters,' I told him. 'We're going to need to organise a reception committee for those shuttles coming in behind us, and we won't have a lot of time to spare.'

'Aye aye, sir,' he said again, and busied himself at the controls. Reluctantly, the Aquila gained a little height, wallowing as it did so, and I got my first glimpse of the planetary capital in the distance, the marble domes of the cathedral tinted blood red by the rays of the setting sun. I hoped that wouldn't turn out to be an omen.

'This is Commissar Cain,' I voxed, 'inbound aboard the schola progenium shuttle *Sanguis Iuvenis*, estimated time of arrival at Rytepat...' ³⁰ I paused momentarily, and glanced at Sprie.

'About seven minutes,' he assured me.

'Four minutes,' I said crisply. 'Have a vehicle waiting on the pad, ready to take me to the operations room.' I glanced at the pilot again, noting his faintly puzzled expression. 'Never hurts to keep them on the hop. And this way there's a remote possibility they might actually be able to get something organised before we arrive.'

He nodded, and returned his attention to the controls. 'We could do with an enginseer to take a look at these systems,' he said speculatively.

'Good point.' I activated the comm-bead again. 'Get a cogboy out there too,' I added. 'We got a bit too close to those heretic barges for comfort.' I didn't elaborate, of course, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to give the impression that we'd been in combat already.

'Yes, sir!' the vox-op replied, sounding faintly breathless, and the link

went dead.

‘I can see the field,’ Sprie said calmly, heading straight for it across the middle of the city, showing a fine disregard for civilian air traffic restrictions in the process. By the time we were on the final approach we were actually skimming between the spires of the taller buildings, no doubt leaving a trail of shattered windows in our wake, and I could quite clearly see the pale blobs of upturned faces turning to stare at us as we descended.³¹ ‘Crossing the threshold.’

I made sure my crash webbing was tight again, just to be on the safe side, anticipating the impact of our struggling Aquila against the apron at any moment, but to my relieved surprise it never came. Sprie kicked in the landing thrusters, bringing the nose up and round as he did so, and there ahead of us was a landing pad, its perimeter marked by winking lights which seemed all the brighter in the gathering gloom, a utility truck just drawing up next to it to disgorge a faintly panic-stricken honour guard.

We did hit the rockcrete with a noticeable thump, which made Sprie wince, but in all honesty I’ve been in fully controlled landings heavier than that, and I was up and out of my seat even before he’d finished powering down. ‘Thank you,’ I said sincerely.

‘Not one of my better touchdowns,’ he replied, a touch ruefully, ‘but it’s done the job.’ He hit the control for the boarding ramp, and the smell of burned fuel and suppressed panic hissed in from outside, along with the growling of engines and a babble of voices.

‘And it’s time I got on with mine,’ I said.

‘You’d better make it quick, sir.’ Sprie indicated the auspex screen, on which a small cluster of fast-moving dots had just appeared. ‘We’re about to have company.’



Editorial Note:

This seems as good a time as any to append the following, which gives a slightly wider overview of the subsequent action than Cain is able to supply from his own position in the thick of things.

From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127. M42.

Though the first incursion was driven off by the combined efforts of the *Lucre Foedus* and a concerted assault by the tactical fighter wing based at Rytepat aerodrome on the outskirts of Havendown, the fleeing heretics left a poisonous legacy behind them. Assault shuttles began to land in several places, where their occupants were able to wreak considerable havoc before the local PDF garrisons brought them to heel; none more so than in the planetary capital itself, which bore the brunt of the attack. It was in this action that Commissar Cain was first involved in the unfolding drama, having hastened to offer his services to the gallant defenders, who were, no doubt, suitably grateful.



EIGHT

‘Who’s in charge here?’ I asked, hurrying down the ramp with a carefully assumed air of purposeful energy. If I’d read the auspex right, we had only a handful of minutes before the enemy arrived, and I wanted to be comfortably ensconced in a nice cosy command bunker before that happened.

The sergeant in charge of the group of troops lined up beside the truck I’d noticed before saluted, a little nervously. ‘That would be me, sir. Sergeant Benten.’

‘Commissar Cain,’ I said, as though he wouldn’t already know. ‘Good of you to come and meet me.’ I nodded at the nine troopers accompanying him. ‘Although I wasn’t really expecting an escort.’ That was the sort of thing a modest hero was supposed to say, of course, so I supposed I ought to say it. I never like to disappoint people, especially if there’s a chance that they’re going to live long enough to hold a grudge. I can’t deny I was pleased to see them, though; if I was about to be caught out in the open when the enemy arrived, it wasn’t going to hurt to have half a score of lasgun-toting troopers standing between me and a horde of Chaos-worshipping psychopaths. On the other hand, it would take precious moments to get them all embarked again. I returned the salute, trying to conceal my impatience, and took a step towards the cab of the truck. ‘Perhaps we’d better get going. I’m afraid we don’t have much time.’

‘No, sir.’ Benten clambered up after me, while the driver swung into his seat and gunned the engine, which, thank the Emperor, he’d had the sense to leave running. ‘We’ve got incoming contacts. But I’m sure you already know that.’

‘It was kind of hard to miss,’ I told him, wishing I was as relaxed as I was

trying to appear. At least the dolts in the command post appeared to realise what was going on, though, and were reacting to it with some semblance of efficiency. A squadron of Hydras roared past us as we got underway, deploying around the landing pads and the runways used by the heavier cargo lifters,³² their quad barrels sweeping the sky for the first sign of the approaching enemy. Over by the perimeter, more troopers were running to man fixed weapon emplacements, and as we began to pick up speed towards the PDF compound adjacent to the aerodrome I could see similar efforts under way around the complex of stores and barrack blocks beyond the chain link fence separating the two installations.

‘Get those luminators doused,’ I voxed the command centre. There were no more friendly aircraft behind us, and the bright lights around the runway and the landing pads would only serve to guide the enemy to their target. After a moment they went dark, along with the external floodlights dotted around the PDF compound, and a few seconds later the lights in the buildings began to flicker out too. As the gathering night overtook the military sites, the distant lights of the city seemed to shine clearer and stronger by contrast, and I began to wonder if perhaps there was a flaw in my strategy; if the enemy pilots overlooked us entirely, and aimed for the most visible target instead, they’d be coming down smack in the middle of the planetary capital.

Oh well, too late to worry about that now, and I didn’t suppose it would make much difference in any case; in my experience the forces of Chaos would far rather slaughter unarmed civilians than get into a stand-up fight with real soldiers. (Or, in this case, the dregs of the PDF, but they were all we had, so I’d just have to make the best of it.) Our driver reached out a hand to the headlight switch on the dashboard, then hesitated before flicking it.

‘Wait,’ Benten told him. ‘Let your eyes adjust.’ We’d have the advantage in the initial exchange of fire now, our night vision already working, whereas the enemy would still be trying to get orientated as they stumbled out of the landing craft.

Relieved that the sergeant understood, I nodded. ‘It’s not as if there’s much out here to hit,’ I told the driver encouragingly, just as another Hydra loomed up out of nowhere, forcing us to swerve. In a moment or two, though, our driver’s confidence returned, and he accelerated through the thickening evening twilight. The gate in the chain link fence was growing

closer, seeming to glow faintly in the yellowish radiance of the city in the distance, and I began to think we might just make it to safety before the attack began.

Of course I was wrong. Something big and dark howled overhead, shrieking like a daemon getting its first whiff of Jurgen, and ploughed into the rockcrete ahead of us, gouging a trench as it went, bouncing our hurtling truck on its springs. The driver swung the wheel frantically as the crippled shuttle slithered towards the fence in a shower of pulverised 'crete, sparks and flames spewing all around it as though it had just been vomited up by hell itself, demolishing the fragile barrier before finally coming to rest. We clipped the edge of the furrow it had left and began to roll, bouncing back upright again by a miracle, and roared through a pool of blazing promethium. A second or two later our burning tyres burst, unable to sustain the pressure of the expanding air inside them.

'Everyone out!' I commanded, as we slewed to a halt. We'd be sitting ducks in an immobilised vehicle. Time to leg it, and find some more solid cover.

I glanced around. The Hydras were engaging the incoming shuttles in earnest now, their guns hammering, lighting up the darkness with vivid orange flashes, and ripping most of the enemy drop-ships to shreds. Hardly surprising, too; as one exploded in midair a few hundred metres away, raining fire, debris, and body parts onto the apron below, I could see by the light of its destruction that most of the formation was made up of unarmoured civilian craft, apparently pressed into service, rather than the more robust military ships I might have expected. That meant that this little expedition had been dispatched ahead of the main fleet in a hurry, although there wasn't time to ponder the full implications of that at the moment.

'This way, sir!' Benten gestured towards a blockhouse standing off to one side, the kind of thing you see scattered around starports and aerodromes all the time without ever stopping to wonder what might be in them, and we began to run towards it. This particular example, once the door had been persuaded open by a couple of las-bolts and a swipe from my chainsword, proved to house firefighting equipment. (Rather ironically, I found myself thinking at the time.) We piled inside, grateful for the thick walls, and I set the troopers to rolling the most solid pieces of kit we could find across the entrance to set up a tolerable firing position.

'This seems defensible enough,' Benten said, and I nodded grimly.

‘It’s going to have to be,’ I said. Despite the best efforts of the Hydra gunners, several of the shuttles were down more or less in one piece, and dim figures were piling out of them, silhouetted nicely by the flames of their arrival for the most part, looking for a target to engage. They were finding them too; local troopers were hurrying to intercept them, trucks and light utility vehicles hurtling across the runways, pintel-mounted stubbers blazing away as they came, while slower-moving Chimera troop carriers followed in their wake, the multi-lasers in their turrets seeking out the largest concentrations of enemy soldiers.

They weren’t getting it all their own way, though; some of the intruders were armed with rocket launchers, engaging the oncoming armour as smoothly and efficiently as Imperial Guardsmen, working in cohesive heavy weapons teams. I felt a prickling sensation in the palms of my hands, and flinched as one of the Chimeras exploded; instead of wasting time in hysterical jubilation, like the Chaotic rabbles I’d generally faced before, the enemy troopers simply prepared to fire again.

‘Aim for the heavy weapon teams,’ I told Benten, who relayed the instruction to the rest of the squad with undisguised enthusiasm. The enemy hadn’t seen us yet, although it could only be a matter of time, and I didn’t want to squander the advantage of surprise. If we could take out the rocketeers, and let the Chimeras advance unmolested, I’d be able to complete my interrupted journey surrounded by armour plate, which ought to be proof against whatever small arms the invaders carried.

Our first volley took them in the flank, dropping a couple of the gunners and a brace of loaders, and attracting the attention of their small-arms toting squad mates. To my surprise the answering fire which began to patter off the reassuringly solid rockcrete surrounding us was a hail of las-bolts, rather than the odd mixture of rounds from obsolete firearms and whatever else they’d been able to scavenge which I’d expected, and my palms began to itch even more strongly than before. Something about this situation definitely wasn’t right.

‘We’re getting reports from the tribunals in Havendown,’ a voice in my comm-bead told me, tense with stress. ‘Three enemy shuttles are down inside the city. The enemy’s deploying, and firing on the civilian population. The tribunals are mobilising riot squads, but they’re unable to contain them.’

‘Get a platoon or two in there to back them up,’ I instructed, wishing I’d

made it to the bunker, where I'd have a nice big hololith to help me keep track of which units were where, not to mention a distinct lack of heretics trying to part my hair with a las-bolt. Then inspiration struck, and I fished my data-slate out of my greatcoat pocket.³³ 'Patch a tactical update to my slate.'

Fortunately their tech-priests were quick off the mark with the correct incantations, and my commissarial override codes got me into the core of the PDF datanet without any problems, so I was able to run a quick eye over the troop dispositions while Benten and his men played pot the heretic with every sign of enjoyment. The walls of our makeshift redoubt were strong, and so far we hadn't sustained any casualties, to my carefully concealed surprise.

'Third company, first, fourth and sixth platoons,' I said. 'They're mounted up and unengaged.' At least according to the data I had they were, sitting in their Chimeras ready to lead a death or glory charge down the main road to Havendown the minute a non-existent heretic horde showed their faces.

'But that would leave the southern perimeter virtually undefended,' my unseen interlocutor objected.

'There's nothing to defend it from, until the enemy in the city gets tired of murdering civilians,' I snapped, hoping I was right. 'Take the fight to them, and put a stop to it.' Right then, of course, I was more interested in saving my own neck, but I knew that if we wanted to have even a prayer of holding on to this world in the long term we needed to convince the proles that we could defend them. Otherwise morale would go through the floor, and we wouldn't have a hope in hell of maintaining order.

'Yes, sir.' Whoever it was in command clearly didn't like my call, but that wasn't my concern; mindful that I'd been left with a distinctly unwelcome errand for the Inquisition, I was keeping the bigger picture in mind, as well as the more pressing matter of staying alive long enough to say 'I told you so.'

'They're advancing,' Benten told me, abruptly shattering the illusion that I'd found a reasonably safe bolt hole from which to observe things until the noise stopped. 'By fire and movement.'

'Are you sure?' I asked. In my experience the forces of Chaos advanced in a single, uncoordinated rush, screaming blasphemous gibberish, and obligingly dying in droves without displaying anything remotely like sensible tactics.

Benten nodded, clearly piqued by what must have sounded like a lack of confidence in his abilities, and gestured towards the doorway. 'See for yourself,' he said.

'I've no doubt you're right,' I said, repairing the damage as best I could, 'but that's extremely unusual.' I peered out at the twilight battlefield, unable for a moment to distinguish friend from foe in the deepening gloom, which in itself was disturbing. The Chimeras and the fast-moving light vehicles were rolling up the enemy flanks, now we'd put a dent in their anti-armour capability, and the main bulk of the Chaotic force was pulling back in our direction. Not good. I ducked back reflexively as a volley of las-rounds gouged little craters from the rockcrete walls defending us, and sent a couple of shots back from my laspistol in reply, with no noticeable effect. As the sergeant had said, while half the group facing us fired, forcing us to keep our heads down, the rest of the shadowy figures hurried forward, racing for the refuge of the next piece of cover or patch of darkness.

'Is it?' Benten asked, and I nodded, beginning to feel seriously concerned. It would only be a matter of time before one of those figures got close enough to lob a grenade in here, at which point all bets would be off.

'It is. I've seldom seen Chaotic troops so disciplined,' I said, paging through the datafiles in search of the callsign I wanted. I could always have gone through the command centre, of course, but as you've no doubt deduced, I didn't have a lot of confidence in them, and where saving my skin is concerned I prefer not to delegate. Finding the one I wanted, I cut into the comm-net with my commissarial clearance. '*Vacca Ferreus*, this is Commissar Cain, requesting pickup for my escort detail.' As always, I was careful to phrase things so that my primary concern would seem to be the welfare of the troopers I was with, rather than my own miserable skin. 'We're pinned down, and about to be overrun.'

'*Vacca Ferreus* responding,' a faintly overawed voice replied, and the nearest Chimera accelerated in our direction, spitting incandescent death from the multi-laser in its main turret, while the forward-mounted heavy bolter chewed away at the heretics advancing on our position. A volley of small-arms fire greeted it, peppering its armour plate with scorch marks, and surrounding it with a nimbus of sparks from the flecks of paint which vaporised with every hit, but nothing vital seemed to be damaged, and within moments it was slewing to a halt next to where we were holed up. The driver rotated the heavy vehicle on its tracks, keeping the hull-mounted

anti-personnel weapon and the heaviest armour pointing at the enemy troopers, and the rear boarding ramp clanged to the rockcrete ahead of us.

‘This way!’ The vehicle’s commander was waiting inside, a laspistol in his hand, and gestured us forward. ‘We’ll cover you!’

‘Much obliged,’ I told him, hanging back a little to make sure none of the troopers got shot by an unsuspected flanking unit on the short but nerve-racking journey across the open space in between. No one did, so I followed a moment later, secure in the knowledge that, by being the last to leave our refuge, I’d just consolidated my undeserved reputation for being concerned for the welfare of the common troopers yet again.

I was halfway across the open space when I caught sight of a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye, and the coin finally dropped. Of course the enemy had outflanked us, just as I’d feared: they just weren’t stupid enough to betray their position by potting a few expendable troopers when there was a Hero of the Imperium there to gun down instead. I raised my pistol, then hesitated; the figures in the gloom seemed to be wearing standard Munitorum issue flak armour after all.

‘Commissar! Wait!’ The leader of the soldiers running towards me called out as he came. ‘I’ve got a message from the command bunker!’

I shot him, all doubts abruptly dispelled, and he fell, but his fellow troopers came on, bringing up their lasguns to fire. Fortunately, in order to perpetrate their little masquerade, they’d held the barrels down, and had to bring them back on aim before they could shoot at me; that gave me a split second to act, and I took it, diving for the open hatch of the Chimera, from which warm, yellow light was spilling. A volley of las-bolts followed me, but fortunately it’s almost impossible to shoot accurately and run at the same time, so I hit the deck and rolled to my feet with little more to show for the experience than a thick smear of grime on my greatcoat, and a few scorched holes around the hem where the heretic scum had got almost, but not quite, lucky enough.

‘Commissar! How did you know?’ the Chimera commander, a Sergeant Blease according to the name stencilled on his torso armour, asked, looking stunned.

‘If the bunker had a message, they would have voxed it,’ I replied, as the heavy armour plate rose to shield us from the blizzard of shots. Just in the nick of time, too; even on the run you can put enough las-bolts into the air to make things extremely unhealthy, if you switch to full auto, which most

of the heretic squad seemed to have done. The turret above us rotated rapidly, with a whine of servos, the multi-laser barked once, and it all went quiet outside again. I turned to Benten. 'Back outside,' I said. 'Let's mop them up before they can regroup.'

'Very good, sir,' he said, clearly wishing I'd make my mind up and stick to it. More than anything at that point I'd have liked to have followed my original plan, making a run for the bunker, and leaving the mopping up to the PDF, but something about the heretic squad continued to worry me, and I knew I wouldn't be able to rest unless I made sure of it. More to the point, I knew Amberley would be very unhappy if I didn't either confirm or discount the unsettling thought I'd just had.

'Kindle the spotlights,' I told Blease. By this time there would be little advantage to fighting in the dark, and I wanted to be absolutely sure of what I suspected I'd find. If he was surprised he didn't show it, simply nodding in confirmation, and hitting the external luminator controls as he dropped the ramp again.

Outside was just as confused as most of the firefights I'd ever been in, with people running, falling, screaming, and shooting at each other, the darkness pierced with flickering orange beacons where vehicles and pieces of debris continued to burn. The clear white light of our Chimera's spotlight seemed dazzling by contrast, and I squinted for a moment until my eyes adjusted, acutely aware that the moment I stepped into the cone of radiance I'd become a fire magnet for every heretic still standing. I turned to Benten.

'Fire for suppression,' I ordered, and the squad complied with a will, unleashing a barrage of fully automatic las-bolts at the nearest concentration of Chaos troopers. The *Vacca Ferreus*'s gunner responded too, and they scattered like a flock of widgeon surprised by a hunting party.

Good enough: I wasn't going to get a better chance. I hurried forward, fastidiously skirting the rank-smelling scorch marks and lumps of carbonised gristle that marked the last resting place of the group which had tried to ambush me, and reached their erstwhile leader. To my surprise he was still twitching, my las-bolt having been partially stopped by his armour, and he tried to raise his gun the moment he saw me.

'Death to the lackeys of the Corpse-God!' he gasped, the light of madness in his eyes, and I kicked the lasgun away before his finger could tighten on the trigger.

'Good evening to you too,' I responded, aiming my laspistol at his head.

He wasn't going to last much longer in any case, but I'd waste the bolt in a heartbeat if he tried anything like that again.

A quick glance at his uniform told me all I needed to know, and a cold chill of pure horror worked its way down my spine. My initial impression had been correct: it was standard Munitorum issue. The Imperial aquila embossed on the helmet and chest plate had been crudely defaced, probably by some sort of power tool, and the eight-pointed symbol of Chaos daubed on in their stead. His lasgun had received the same treatment, and I made a mental note to order all recovered equipment destroyed: if the spirits of the weapons had been corrupted along with the souls of their owners, they could never be safely returned to Imperial service.

'What happened at Madasa?' I asked, recognising the unit patch of one of their PDF regiments on the shoulder of his fatigues.³⁴

The man struggled for breath for a moment, then, to my astonishment, he smiled. 'Varan,' he said.

'Varan?' I asked, baffled, as, at the time, the name meant nothing to me. 'Who's Varan?'

'He showed us the truth. He set us free.' Wonderful, a whole airfield full of dying heretics I could have chosen to interrogate, and I get the one who's already delirious. 'He'll do the same for you when he arrives.'

'Not if I can help it,' I said, a strange sense of foreboding settling across me as I spoke. 'The word of the Emperor's always been good enough for me.'

'Then you're surely damned, along with your rotting master.' Emperor help me, I swear, he actually sounded sorry for me. Completely wrong-footed, I barely noticed the stealthy movement of his hand until it was almost too late. 'Death to the servants of—'

'You've already done that bit,' I snapped, pulling the trigger. His head exploded into crimson mist, and he slumped back onto the rockcrete, the grenade he'd been trying to prime inside his equipment pouch rolling out of his slackening hand to come to rest against the toe of my boot.

'Sir! Are you all right?' Benten asked, and I became abruptly aware that the firing around us had all but died away. I listened to the voices in my comm-bead for a moment, which confirmed that the battle had been won, and shook my head.

'No,' I told the sergeant. 'I'm worried. And I'm not at all happy about it.' I turned, and led the way back towards the Chimera I'd commandeered, the

palms of my hands itching furiously. Things were very wrong indeed, and if my lifetime of experience was anything to go by, they were about to get a whole lot worse.

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NINE

Fortunately, by the time I made it to the command bunker it really was all over bar the shouting, at least in the immediate vicinity of Rytepat: so instead of getting caught up in any more firefights I got to sit and drink recaf and watch the reports coming in from around the globe, which I found infinitely preferable, despite the grim tidings they contained. The enemy had struck hard in over a dozen places, although by the grace of the Emperor it seemed that the vast majority of them had been involved in the attack on the PDF headquarters instead of the apparently random scattering of civilian targets. Outnumbered, if not exactly overmatched, the ones who'd assaulted the aerodrome and the barracks attached to it had ended up annihilated almost to a man: something I seemed to be receiving a great deal of undeserved credit for, simply because I'd happened to be on the spot at the time.³⁵

It had been a very different story in Havendown, though, not to mention the other towns and cities they'd hit. There the civilians had borne the brunt of the invasion effectively unprotected for far too long, until the PDF had finally got their collective fingers out and mounted a vigorous counter-attack, which, for the most part, seemed to have inflicted as much collateral damage as the wanton destruction of the enemy.

'A very grave business,' the Planetary Governor said, shaking his head sadly, so we all knew how seriously he was taking it. 'Have you any idea what they were hoping to achieve?'

'Simply to sow as much panic as they could before the main invasion fleet arrives,' Rorkins told him. We were meeting the Governor, Lio Trevellyan, in the gardens of his residence, a wide vista of carefully landscaped gardens near the centre of the city; only the spires of hab blocks and manufactoria

protruding over the perimeter wall broke the illusion of a rural retreat. From our seats in a fragrant hegantha bower, which acted as a windbreak, and effectively shielded us from both the prying eyes and overactive ears which would have been all too ubiquitous inside the palace, I could see detachments of the household guard patrolling the top of the wall. Thin spires of smoke still rose in the distance, marking the sites of last night's battles, which the troopers I'd dispatched seemed to have won without too much difficulty, thank the Throne.

'That seems to be the case,' I agreed, trying to ignore the scent of the hegantha blossoms surrounding us. They were Amberley's favourite flower, and, pleasant as it always was to be reminded of her, it was hardly helping my concentration. Not only that, of course, by extension they were a reminder of the seemingly impossible commission Orelus had dumped in my lap on her behalf before scuttling out of the system with his tail between his legs, which was something of a distraction to say the least. 'The main objective was clearly a decapitation strike against the high command of the PDF, but there were no military targets at any of the other sites they hit.' Although from what I'd seen, the senior commanders left behind after the Guard tithes had scooped up anyone halfway competent could hardly have performed any worse if they'd been literally deprived of their heads. 'We'll analyse all the intelligence we can gather, of course; that may point to some underlying motive we've so far overlooked.'

Most of the heads around the makeshift conference table, which had been hastily erected on a couple of trestles by no doubt disgruntled gardeners, nodded in agreement. Apart from Rorkins, myself, and Governor Trevellyan, Visiter and Julien were also present, together with a handful of senior PDF staffers whose names I hadn't caught, or particularly cared to. Their apparent willingness to leave the citizens of Havendown to fend for themselves rather than depart from some standard battle plan still incensed me: not that I cared particularly about a bunch of civilians I'd never even met, of course, but protecting them was what the PDF was supposed to be for, and if they were derelict in this duty, there was no telling what else they'd let slide. Not only that, it betrayed a rigidity of thinking that was potentially disastrous on the battlefield, where circumstances are in a constant state of flux, and failing to adapt to them means people dying, possibly even me.

The Governor's summons had come shortly after dawn, catching up with

me just as I was on the verge of returning to the schola so, seizing the moment, I'd made a few excuses and sent Sprie back in the Aquila³⁶ to collect my fellow conspirators. If we were really going to seize control of the war effort, and cut out the dead wood at the heart of the defenders, we'd never have a better opportunity than this.

'We're also considering the possibility that you might have been the target of the group which came down in the capital,' Julien said. She'd donned her power armour for the occasion, the first time I'd ever seen her wear it, the bright red sheen of its ceramite carapace contrasting with the black surcoat embroidered with the sigil of her order.³⁷ It certainly seemed to have impressed Trevellyan, anyway; he'd barely glanced at the rest of us since we'd arrived, with the obvious exception of myself, of course. 'You're the Emperor's anointed guardian of this world, so your assassination would certainly have impeded our efforts to defend it.'

'I'd like to think so, sister, but I rather doubt that,' Trevellyan said. 'If I'd died, my niece would simply have taken over precisely where I left off.' He smiled, in a self-deprecating manner I was unused to seeing on the faces of the aristocracy, and, to my surprise, I found myself quite liking him. 'In fact, she'd probably do a damn sight better job. But by the Emperor's grace, it seems, I'm going to keep the throne warm for her for a while longer.' My first impression had been that he was startlingly young to be in such an exalted position, but, as we continued to converse, I began to realise he was a great deal older than he seemed. No doubt he'd undergone a juvenat treatment or two, but it wasn't so much that which made him appear younger than his years as his evident relish for life. A relish tempered with a bit of hard-won wisdom, too, if I was any judge.

'Nevertheless, I trust you won't object too strongly if we endeavour to keep your niece waitin' for as long as we can,' Visiter put in. We'd all agreed to present the most united front possible, backing each other up wherever the conversation led, in order to underline our experience of such matters, and the fact that we could function smoothly as a team. Of course even if we succeeded in freezing out the PDF commanders everything we did would still be under the Governor's nominal jurisdiction, but he seemed sensible enough to just let us get on with the business of saving his world with minimal interference.

'I won't object at all,' Trevellyan assured him, with the hint of a smile.

'Good.' I adopted my most commissarial expression, the one that had been

known to make generals break wind with apprehension, and leaned across the table to emphasise how serious I was being. 'Then we need to get down to business. Last night's raid was a wake-up call, and if we're going to still have a planet to stand on by the end of the month, we'd better listen to it.'

'All our units are on high alert,' the PDF representative with the greatest amount of gold braid and the highest number of chins assured me blandly. 'Ready to respond to any repeat of the incursion.'

'I'm sure the citizens of Havendown you were ready to leave flapping in the breeze last night for your administrative convenience will be relieved to hear it,' I said sarcastically. 'I, on the other hand, am far from confident that that will be enough.' I half expected him to argue, but either my absurdly inflated reputation on this planet, or a proper appreciation of what a commissar was, and was able to do if sufficiently provoked, made him hold his tongue. I turned to the Governor. 'I would like to suggest that you appoint Colonel Rorkins commander in chief of the defence forces for the duration of the emergency. He's had extensive experience of fighting the Great Enemy, and if anyone on Perlia is capable of holding the line against them, it's him.'

'And you, commissar,' Trevellyan said, eyeing me narrowly. 'I would have thought you were the natural choice for the job.'

'A commissar's role is purely an advisory one,' I explained carefully, conscious that to most civilians we're just Imperial Guard officers in fancy hats. 'We're outside the chain of command.' Of course most Guard officers listen quite carefully to whatever advice a commissar cares to offer despite that, as we're allowed to shoot them if they don't, but that was beside the point.

'Quite so,' Visiter agreed. 'And even if Cain was willin' to take direct command, he'd still be far better employed elsewhere, boostin' morale and sniffin' out any traitors or slackers already in our midst.' His gaze rested momentarily on the array of dress uniforms across the table, just long enough to make his point, and make a few of the less cautious bridle indignantly.

'I most certainly would,' I agreed. Apart from anything else, there was still the Shadowlight to consider; my chances of sneaking off to try and fulfil my commission from the Inquisition without anyone noticing would be all but impossible if I was stuck somewhere surrounded by frakwits expecting me to save the damn planet for them. Not to mention the fact that if, as my

itching palms insisted, it was all going to go horribly wrong, I had no objection to Rorkins taking the blame. After all, if things were to turn out right after all, despite my misgivings, I was sure there'd be plenty of credit to go around.

'Very well then, colonel.' Trevellyan inclined his head. 'Consider yourself our Warmaster for the duration of the emergency.' His gaze swept the PDF end of the table. 'I trust no one has any objections?'

'No, of course not,' the chin collector said, without even a token attempt to hide his resentment. He was hardly going to argue with the Governor about it, though, not with a commissar sitting there too, with a hand resting casually on the holster of his laspistol, so he turned to Rorkins and nodded. 'By your command, Warmaster.'

'Sir, will do,' Rorkins said mildly. 'I've never liked that particular title. It seems to foster unhealthy ambitions.'

The implicit reference to the most notorious follower of the Ruinous Powers wasn't lost on anyone, and Trevellyan looked at him thoughtfully. 'We can hardly stick with colonel,' he pointed out. 'That would leave most of your immediate subordinates outranking you, at least on paper.'

Rorkins shrugged, with a hint of impatience. 'Commander in chief, then. We've got rather more pressing things to discuss than what goes on the office door plate.'

'Quite so,' another of the PDF drones put in, managing to sound both condescending and unctuous at the same time. 'We need to devise an effective strategy against the invaders as quickly as possible.'

'First sensible thing I've heard out of any of you,' Rorkins said. He swept his gaze along them. 'Strategy meeting in my office then. I expect you'll have found a suitable one for me by the time I get to the bunker. Ninety minutes ought to be long enough for you to get a complete inventory of our assets together, so I'll see you then.' He waited a fraction of a second. 'Hop to it. That wasn't a request.'

'Yes, sir.' Visibly swallowing their resentment at being so summarily dismissed, the dead wood left the table, and we were able to begin planning the defence of Perlia in earnest.

'So.' Trevellyan waited until they were all out of earshot. 'I'll be interested to hear what you've got in mind.'

'At the moment,' I confessed, 'we're just winging it. But in all honesty, the situation doesn't look too good.'

‘No, it doesn’t.’ Trevellyan nodded thoughtfully, and favoured us with a wintry smile. ‘But it’s looking a good deal more hopeful now than it did last night.’

‘Which doesn’t alter the fact that the PDF has been bled white by the Guard tithes,’ Julien put in. ‘There are fewer than a quarter of the number of men under arms that there ought to be for a population of this size, the individual troopers lack combat experience, and the higher command levels are barely capable of tying their own shoelaces.’ She glanced in my direction. ‘Do you see any potential morale problems?’

‘Hardly anything but,’ I agreed. ‘Although they’ll be fighting for their homes and families; that means they’ll be motivated, at least.’ I shrugged. ‘I started out with far less promising material than that the last time I was here.’

‘And ended up throwing the orks off the planet,’ Trevellyan agreed. ‘Let’s hope you have as much luck with this heretic fleet.’

‘It won’t be easy,’ Visiter said, looking thoughtful, ‘but we might be able to do somethin’ with the SDF boats to even the odds a bit.’ He pulled out a data-slate, and began sketching complicated diagrams with the tip of a luxpen. ‘Your rogue trader friend give you any idea of the number of ships we’ll be facin’?’

‘Not as such,’ I admitted. ‘But it’s high. High enough to have rolled up two heavily-defended systems along the way. Even if they took some serious losses at Madasa, the handful of boats you’ve got left won’t hold them up for long.’

‘Not in a battle line, no,’ Visiter agreed, seeming unperturbed at the prospect. ‘But there’s another way.’ He held up his scribblings, which I’m bound to admit meant nothing to me. ‘If we station them out in the halo,³⁸ or one of the asteroid fields, powered down, they’ll be almost impossible to detect. Once the enemy start movin’ in towards the planet from the outer system we can mount hit and run raids against their flanks, pickin’ off their transport vessels; Emperor willin’, that should keep a lot of their troops from makin’ it down to the surface.’

‘That sounds suicidal to me,’ Rorkins said. ‘The transporters will be protected by warships. I can’t ask you to sacrifice your crews on a desperate gamble like that.’ No one challenged the implicit assumption that the commodore was now in charge of all our spaceborne assets, and I didn’t expect them to.

Visiter shook his head, looking faintly amused. 'No one's gettin' sacrificed on my watch,' he assured us. 'Leave the fleet tactics to me.'

'Fine, then.' Rorkins smiled bleakly. 'Now all we have to worry about is getting the PDF to function like they're supposed to.' He glanced in my direction. 'Are any of your cadets up to the job?'

'They'll have to be,' I told him. 'They stood up well enough to the tyranids, which augurs well. But we'll need a lot more than ten to keep the rabble you've inherited up to the mark.' Maybe Nelys would get to shoot someone for cowardice after all, I thought grimly.

'I was hoping you'd attach them to the headquarters staff,' Rorkins said, to my quiet relief. The thought of scattering them around the planet, to take care of themselves as best they could, had been mildly disturbing to say the least.

'That shouldn't be a problem,' I agreed. 'I was planning to get them started on the intelligence analysis.' That was part of their training, and should keep them out of trouble while I sneaked off to the Valley of Daemons to try and secure the Shadowlight. Of course, what I did with it then, assuming I could persuade the Mechanicus to part with the wretched thing where Orelus had already failed, Emperor alone knew; but I'd worry about that when the time came.

'Good.' Rorkins nodded again, and turned to Julien. 'I trust I can rely on you to help co-ordinate some battlefield strategies?'

'You can,' the Celestian assured him. 'And once we get back to the schola, I'll get some of my senior novitiates to form a mobile reserve. They're raw, but they can still heft a bolter.'

'Good,' Rorkins said, considering it. The Sororitas novices had half a dozen suits of antiquated power armour between them, rather more battered and utilitarian than Julien's set, which they used for practice drills; poor as they undoubtedly were as such things went, they would still be quite formidable against lasguns and flesh. 'Any other suggestions?'

'We could try calling for help,' the Governor suggested dryly. In all honesty, I'd forgotten he was there for a moment, engrossed as we had been in trying to find a way of defending the planet. We all looked at him blankly. 'We do have astropaths on Perlia, you know.'

Remembering the source of Brasker's rumour mongering, I nodded slowly. 'Of course we do. But it may not be much of a help.' That was a considerable understatement. Astropathic communication was somewhat hit

or miss at the best of times, and with the warp currents stirred up by the malevolent forces haemorrhaging from the Eye of Terror, and the vast shadow cast across them by the tyrannid hive mind, we'd have about as much chance of getting through to the sector fleet as if we'd scribbled a note to them and flung it out of the airlock of an Aquila. Nevertheless, as I'd found on many previous occasions, a slim chance is infinitely better than no chance at all, so I shrugged, and spread my hands. 'Worth a try, though. Someone out there might be listening.'

Of course, as it turned out, something was listening, very carefully, for some very specific signals, but fortunately for my peace of mind I remained in blissful ignorance of the fact.

'I'll give the instructions,' Trevellyan said, leaning back in his chair. 'Is there anything else I should know?'

'Not at this stage, your excellency,' Rorkins said tactfully. We still couldn't rule out a hidden cabal of Chaotic sympathisers gnawing away at the roots of government, don't forget, which was why we'd decided to take over the defence of Perlia ourselves: unlikely as it seemed that the Governor was a member of such a conspiracy, there was no telling who he might talk to. 'I'll send you a full report at the earliest opportunity.'

'Of course you will,' Trevellyan said, with a faint smile, no doubt divining that such an opportunity was unlikely to arise in the foreseeable future. 'Then if you'll excuse me sister, gentlemen, I've a rather pressing appointment at the sanatorium in Havendown. Rather too many of our citizens found the war arriving a little early last night, and it wouldn't do to neglect my pastoral duties to the survivors.'

'With a pictcaster crew in tow, no doubt,' Rorkins said sourly, once he was sure the Governor was out of earshot.

'I hope so,' I said. 'We need something to boost morale among the civilians, and if he's willing to take on the job, good luck to him.'

'Fine.' Rorkins nodded, his mind already returning to business. 'Then let's concentrate on the military situation.' He glanced around again, making sure that we weren't being overheard. 'I'll be making a big show of moving into the main command bunker at Rytepat, but I'll be spending as little time there as possible. For all intents and purposes, I want to run things from the schola progenium; if there really is a heretic cell in the high command, I want it insulated from any sensitive tactical information.'

'That makes sense,' I agreed, while Visiter and Julien nodded quietly.

‘And since the enemy clearly knows where the main defence headquarters is in any case, let’s not make it easy for them by being in the middle of a target zone when they arrive.’ One quick orbital bombardment would be all that it took to succeed where last night’s commando raid had failed. Reflecting that if it hadn’t been for the fortuitous circumstance of Orelus’s presence in the skies over Perlia, and the damage he’d been able to inflict on the incoming fleet, we’d probably have a flotilla of gunboats over our heads raining death and destruction from the skies right at this moment, I shuddered inwardly.

‘The ground’s more defensible there too,’ Julien added. That was a worrying thought, in its way; she was right, but the mountainous terrain which would work so well to our advantage in staving off an assault would also leave us with nowhere to go if the enemy did succeed in breaking through.

I pointed this out. ‘Maybe we should be factoring in some contingency plans for an evacuation too,’ I added. ‘Glorious last stands are a lot more fun in the history books than in the flesh.’

‘I’ll work somethin’ out,’ Visiter promised, leaving me feeling a little bit more encouraged.

‘Well then,’ Rorkins said, with what seemed to my uneasy mind rather too much relish, ‘if no one’s got anything else to add, let’s go and save the planet.’

As things turned out, of course, it wasn’t going to be quite as simple as that.



Editorial Note:

Despite Colonel Rorkins's cynicism, Governor Trevellyan's pictcast did prove remarkably effective in soothing the understandable degree of alarm among the civilian population following the first enemy attack. The following is a partial transcript of the address he made from the main medicae facility in Havendown that morning, after visiting a few of the more photogenic casualties, and it seems to have succeeded in bolstering civilian morale, at least in the short term.

The cowards who carried out this unforgivable atrocity, and others like it around the globe, have severely underestimated the citizens of Perlia if they think such acts of barbarity will sap our resolve. On the contrary, it only serves to increase it, as the last invaders who dared to set foot on our Emperor-blessed world found to their cost. Scarcely two generations have gone by since the Liberator's army swept the greenskins from Perlia; an army made up not primarily of professional soldiers, but of ordinary citizens, like you and I, caught up in extraordinary times.

I know I can rely on you all to display the same fortitude as our illustrious forebears did; and with Cain the Liberator once more poised to take up arms, I have no doubt that we will prevail once again.

The Emperor's blessing be upon you all.



TEN

I spent the rest of that day, and the following night, in a fever of carefully-concealed impatience. I could hardly turn round to Rorkins and the others and say ‘See you later, I’ve got a little errand to run for the Inquisition, best of luck with the invasion while I’m gone,’ so I threw myself into the preparations as energetically as I could, and waited for an opportunity to sneak away on some plausible-seeming pretext. To say that I chafed at the delay would be something of an understatement: I was acutely aware that we had no idea how long it was going to be before the enemy fleet arrived, and however much time we had, it wasn’t going to be nearly enough.

‘We need more bodies,’ Julien said, ‘it’s as simple as that.’ We’d run into each other in the refectory, grabbing some long-overdue food and recaf on the fly, and talking as we ate. She’d discarded her power armour for the time being, although she kept her bolt pistol handy, and carried a chainsword almost as battered and ill-used as my own wherever she went. Most of the other instructors were going about the place armed, too, generally favouring the hammers and shock mauls which seem to appeal to the Emperor-botherers,³⁹ while the administrative staff opted, more sensibly, for firearms. Even Brasker was sporting an autopistol, somewhat surprisingly engraved with icons of the saints in gold filigree, which he kept stashed in a pocket of his robe, where it deformed the material with a noticeable bulge.

‘You’re right,’ I agreed. The report she’d just shown me made depressing reading. Her original estimate, that the PDF was down to a quarter of its usual strength, had turned out to be a little on the pessimistic side, but not by much. ‘The question is, where do we find them?’

‘You seemed to manage all right during the ork invasion,’ the Celestian

said dryly.

‘That was different,’ I said. ‘The entire continent was overrun, and occupied. Anyone who’d survived that had already gone through hell: it was just a question of giving them guns, pointing them at the greenskins, and telling them it was payback time.’ I smiled grimly. ‘And despite what you might have seen in the holos, the core of the force was always PDF veterans; the civilian militia just get most of the attention because they’re seen as more romantic for some reason.’

‘Of course they are,’ Julien said. ‘Everyone wants to think they could be a hero too, if the chips were down.’ She smiled at me, and shook her head. ‘You don’t really understand the civilian mindset very well, do you?’

‘It’s not my job to,’ I told her, trying not to sound too defensive. I’d met a few civvies over the years, of course, even one or two I quite liked, but I’d been in a military environment ever since a schola like this one had spat me out in the direction of the Commissariat, and most of the ones I’d come into contact with had seemed almost as strange as the tau. (Although at least none of them were grey.)

‘Well, trust me, it’s something we can use,’ Julien said. I shrugged, willing to take her word for it. Her sisterhood moved among the proles as a matter of course, at least the non-militant parts of it did, so it seemed reasonable to assume she knew what she was talking about. ‘Or you can, at any rate.’

‘I might seem dense,’ I said, draining the dregs of my recaf, which had sublimed to bitter sludge in the bottom of the mug, and making a mental note to send Jurgen to fetch me some tanna, ‘but I don’t see how.’ Despite my best efforts I failed to suppress a yawn. Dawn was already tinting the sky beyond the windows a rich, smoky blue, like Amberley’s eyes, and I hadn’t had any sleep since the previous night. I’d been far more exhausted on countless campaigns before, of course, but I was beginning to think I was getting too old for all this.

‘It’s easy,’ Julien said, with a faint smile of sympathy, but then she was half my age, and no doubt all fired up with holy zeal into the bargain. ‘You just make a pictcast or two, asking for volunteers to form a new militia. They’ll turn out in droves.’

‘And get slaughtered,’ I pointed out. ‘We won’t have time to train them, that’s for sure.’

‘They’ll get slaughtered anyway, as soon as the heretics arrive,’ Julien said. ‘You know that as well as I do.’

I nodded soberly, conceding her point. I'd seen the aftermath of Chaotic incursions before, many times, and if there was one thing I was certain of, it was that the concept of non-combatants didn't even exist for the degenerate pawns of the Ruinous Powers. If some of their victims took a few of the invaders with them, it would buy us a little more time, if nothing else, and I've never been averse to a bit more cannon fodder standing in harm's way ahead of me.

'It's worth a try,' I said. 'I'll get Jurgen to make the arrangements.'

'Good man.' Julien smiled encouragingly. 'Then you might want to start putting the fear of the Throne into some of these regimental commanders while you're waiting.' She brought up some more reports about the PDF's state of readiness on the screen of her data-slate, and I groaned inwardly. Even from a quick skim, which was all I had time for before she shut off the power and stowed it in a pouch at her belt, alongside her holstered bolt pistol and several spare clips for it, things looked pretty bad.

'I'll get one of my cadets to prepare a summary,' I said. I'd already thrown most of the intelligence analysis their way in any case, as it was a useful exercise for them, and was far too tedious to bother with myself even if I had been able to find the time to deal with it.

'Good idea. And while they're doing that, try and get some sleep,' Julien advised. 'You're going to have to look like a hero, not some star port dreg on a bender.'

Tactless as her advice may have been, it was undoubtedly sound, and I decided to follow it. In the event, of course, I was only able to grab a couple of hours sleep, but I'd spent long enough in the field over the years to be well aware of how much difference even a cat nap could make, so, assisted by the large bowl of tanna and the plateful of salt grox and eggs Jurgen had thoughtfully provided on rousing me, I was feeling reasonably *compos mentis* when Kayla and Donal turned up in my study with the first summary they'd managed to distil from the raw intelligence I'd turned over to them the afternoon before.

'It seems the colonel was right,' Donal said. 'Apart from the attack on Rytepat, the landings seemed pretty much at random.' He passed me a slate, on which he'd helpfully marked the positions of the ensuing engagements. 'The red ones are the confirmed contacts, and the yellow ones unconfirmed.'

‘Unconfirmed?’ I asked. ‘I thought we’d tracked all their trajectories before they hit.’

‘The PDF claim they did,’ Kayla said, a tone of scepticism clear in her voice. ‘But these two landing sites were deserted when they finally arrived to contain them.’ She indicated the pair of yellow icons, which, I noted with a shiver of unease, were both on the eastern continent, although far too distant from the Valley of Daemons for the hidden Inquisition facility to have been their targets. ‘The reports of the officers in charge are as comprehensive as you might expect.’ Again, from the tone of her voice, she clearly hadn’t expected very much.

‘Let me see,’ I said, paging through the datafiles until I’d found them. They were every bit as waffling and self-justificatory as I’d anticipated, and I dropped the slate on to my desk after no more than a moment of desultory skimming. ‘What’s left after you strip out the buck-passing and arse-covering?’

‘Very little,’ Donal said, somehow managing to convey a degree of world-weariness astonishing in a lad of his years. ‘There were signs of a heavy landing in both locations, but the shuttles were substantially intact, even if they weren’t particularly airworthy any more. There were no bodies found at either LZ, which implies that the occupants disembarked normally, despite the impact. The lieutenant in charge of the platoon which responded to the landing in the Barrens claims to have found a lot of trampled ground and expended power packs: he ventures to suggest this might indicate that the intruders got into a firefight with someone. The platoon which went to the other site doesn’t even report that.’

‘They wouldn’t,’ I said. The second site marked in yellow was in the middle of the desert which sliced across the continent, and I remembered all too vividly how the constant wind would erase any traces of a human presence with drifts of sand within moments when the conditions were right. ‘But we’d better warn any settlements close to those areas that they might be about to get visitors.’ That would be all we needed, wandering guerrilla bands of Chaotic infiltrators coming and going more or less as they pleased.

‘Who could they have got into a firefight with, in any case?’ Kayla asked, and Donal shrugged.

‘The lieutenant suggests orks,’ he said, as though delivering the punch line of a joke he didn’t think was all that funny. ‘They do have occasional

outbreaks in the region, apparently, and he's certain that none of our people were around to engage the enemy.'

'They sound like remarkably tidy orks,' I said, trying to suppress a sudden mental image of blank-faced metal killers. 'If they'd jumped the heretics, the place would have been littered with bolter shells.' Not to mention bits of heretic.

Trying to ignore the tingling in my palms, I paged through the report again, a little more carefully. This lieutenant, Tyso by name, had been quite thorough, it seemed, if only to deflect the possibility of being blamed for letting Throne alone know how many heavily armed raiders loose on the province. He'd even attached a few picts, and a diagram pinpointing the precise locations of the dropped powerpacks, which, to my resigned lack of surprise, all seemed to be from standard-issue lasguns. More Madasan defectors, then, in all likelihood, which was hardly a prospect to relish. Instead of obvious cult warriors sprouting horns and extraneous limbs, we'd apparently lost track of trained soldiers who could pass unremarked among our own people, wreaking Emperor knew what havoc along the way.

Then something about the way the power packs had been scattered suddenly struck me. They'd been discarded in a rough perimeter around the downed shuttle, precisely where, given the terrain, I would have posted pickets to secure the dropzone while the troopers deployed. It didn't take much imagination to fill in the rest: an inexorable enemy advance, the defenders falling back, letting their depleted magazines fall where they stood as they reloaded, pouring round after ineffectual round into the tightening noose of silent warriors, the rising sun glittering from their metal bodies as they advanced unhindered through the barrage of las-bolts...

Enough, I chided myself. Lack of sleep, and my understandable concern about the Shadowlight, were raising old phantoms. Despite my continuing to fret about the possibility, there was still no actual evidence that the necrons were even anywhere in the sector, let alone running around on Perlia.

But, my paranoia insisted, ignoring my best efforts to silence it. The Shadowlight was unimaginably ancient, wasn't it? True, there were stories about mysterious precursor races, aeons dead, which even the eldar barely believed, but the only ones from the dawn of time still unequivocally alive and kicking now were the necrons.⁴⁰ What if the Shadowlight belonged to them, and they wanted it back?

‘Sir? Are you all right?’ Kayla asked, a note of concern evident in her voice.

Recalled to the present, I shook my head, dispelling the ghosts my fearful and exhausted mind had conjured up. ‘Not a lot of sleep last night,’ I said, contriving to look as though I was suppressing a yawn, to plausibly cover my momentary lack of attention. ‘Another dubious perk of the job.’ I returned my attention to the data-slate. ‘Is there any indication at all of what their objective might have been?’ If there was, it would simplify things enormously. Instead of having to comb the countryside for an unknown number of infiltrators, we’d just have to post a guard at their target and wait for them to turn up and be shot.

‘None at all,’ Donal said, sounding personally affronted by the fact. ‘The whole area’s just wilderness. Nothing for kilometres in any direction.’ He winced visibly as Jurgen appeared behind him, a tray in his hands, and seemed to be trying not to breathe for a moment.

‘Thought you might like a bit of tanna, sir,’ my aide said, depositing a tea bowl on the table in front of me, and pouring a generous measure from the pot accompanying it.

‘Thank you, Jurgen. Very welcome,’ I assured him, sipping the fragrant liquid gratefully. ‘Nothing in the desert either,’ I mused aloud.

‘Not unless they were looking for sand devils,’ Kayla said, surprising me. I’d spoken more to clarify my own thoughts than anything else, and I hadn’t expected to elicit a reply.

‘Sand devils?’ I asked, belatedly remembering that she was a native of Perlia, like a lot of the schola students; with so many Perlians serving in the Imperial Guard against the tyranids, a steady trickle of their dependants had been arriving throughout the war.

‘Just a local legend,’ she said dismissively. ‘A few of the sandsiders claim to have seen things out there from time to time, and of course whenever anyone goes missing the devils get the blame.’ She paused for a moment. ‘Well, they used to before the orks arrived, anyway.’

‘What do these devils look like?’ I asked, trying to keep my voice casual.

Kayla looked at me a trifle oddly, then shrugged. ‘I think that rather depends on who’s telling the story,’ she said, ‘and how much they’ve had to drink. It’s not as if they actually exist.’

‘Of course not,’ I said, faintly relieved by her obvious scepticism. But I’d seen a lot of strange stuff over the years, and wasn’t about to dismiss an

apparent coincidence that lightly. The Valley of Daemons had a sinister reputation among the Perlans too, as its name implied, and the Shadowlight had been dug up there.

It wasn't too much of a stretch to assume that who or whatever had built it had left other traces of their presence scattered around the planet, equally deeply buried, and that similar traces of psychic miasma still clung to them. The forces of Chaos had wyrds with them, as surely as hounds had fleas; perhaps some of them could sense this aura, guiding the raiders to sites the Inquisition and the Adeptus Mechanicus hadn't been able to identify yet. But that didn't quite make sense to me: if they really could pull a trick like that, why hadn't the raiders homed in on the Valley of Daemons straight away, instead of the arse end of nowhere?⁴¹

Without any kind of hard evidence, of course, further speculation along these lines would have been particularly fruitless, so I returned my attention to the matters we were able to verify.

'Have you been able to identify any enemy objectives among the confirmed contacts?' I asked. I'd had almost the whole group working on the problem, of course, not just these two, but I'd picked Kayla and Donal to deliver the report because, in their own ways, they were the most intuitive of the bunch, and would be the most likely to make any new connections as we discussed the distilled intelligence.

Donal shook his head. 'Entirely random, so far as we can see,' he said. 'They generally came down in or near a local population centre, moved in, and started trashing the place until the PDF turned up. Then they fought to the death in most cases.' Remembering the trick the trooper I'd tried to interrogate had almost succeeded in pulling with the concealed grenade, I didn't doubt that.

'It was pure wanton destruction,' Kayla concurred. 'No pattern to any of it.' She started paging down a list. 'Markets, museums, hab blocks, Mechanicus shrines, agricultural stores, and a couple of Tribune sector houses.' She shrugged. 'Which is about as close as you'll find to any strategic objectives.'

'What about temples?' I asked, feeling a sudden shiver of unease. The two cadets looked at me curiously for a moment, then glanced back at their slates.

'Just one,' Donal said, after paging through the data for a moment. 'In Mistfall. Took some collateral damage when the enemy fell back towards

it.'

'That's definitely not right,' I said. I'd seen plenty of Chaotic raids in my time, and the aftermath of many more, and in every case the first thing they'd done was desecrate all the temples and symbols of the Emperor they could find, even melting down the coinage if they had the time. Every settlement on the planet had at least a chapel dedicated to Him on Earth, and most a full-sized temple, preferably larger and gaudier than the one in the village down the road. For Chaos reavers to simply ignore these shrines to their most hated enemy in favour of apparently aimless pillaging was completely unprecedented. 'If they ignored the temples, they were after something specific, believe me.' What that might be, though, I couldn't begin to speculate. Not in front of the cadets, anyway.

'That does seem odd, now you mention it,' Donal said, looking faintly surprised. 'I'll take another look at the intel.'

'Do that.' I nodded. 'There might be a pattern there we haven't uncovered yet.' I turned to Kayla. 'Can I reassure the Governor that he wasn't the intended target of a kill team yet, or do the AARs⁴² from Havendown still support Sister Julien's hypothesis?'

'None of the enemy units seemed to be making directly for the palace,' Kayla assured me. 'Although I suppose it's possible that they were hoping to lure enough of the defenders out of position to allow a specialist or two to sneak through.'

'Not that likely, though,' Donal added, bringing up a map of the planetary capital on his slate as he spoke. 'The shuttles came down here, here, and here, in Riverside, the Grand Piazza, and Liberation Square.'

'Was that bloody clock damaged at all?' I asked hopefully, and Donal shook his head.

'Completely intact,' he assured me, enlarging the image. 'If the Governor was the primary target, they could have come down easily in the palace gardens.'

'I see.' That much was obvious. 'So we're back to thinking they were just trying to cause panic.'

'Looks that way,' Kayla agreed. 'The ones in Riverside deployed across the university campus, and got wiped out trying to cross the freefire zone between the drama studio, the history department, and the faculty of Gothic literature. The Tribunes kept the group from the square bottled up until the PDF arrived, so they didn't go anywhere, but tried to make a stand in the

Administratum records office. And the ones from the Piazza set off suicide charges when the Museum of Colonisation was surrounded.’ She shrugged. ‘Nothing much there in any case, just a few models and displays about the early settlements.’

‘I see,’ I said levelly. In my experience, the minions of the Great Enemy generally had some kind of reason for everything they did, even if you had to be as barmy as they were to understand it. In this case, though, it seemed obvious to me that they were after information about ancient Perlia, although what kind I had no idea. Almost certainly something they’d hoped would lead them to the Shadowlight, I strongly suspected. I could hardly tell the cadets that, though. ‘Perhaps it was meant to distract our attention from the attack on the PDF command structure.’ Which sounded reasonably plausible, so I was sure Rorkins and the others would buy it. Donal and Kayla nodded, apparently happy to believe it too, so I leaned back in my chair, on the verge of dismissing them.

At that point someone knocked on the door, and a gradually rising babble beyond the slab of wood told me that Jurgen was guarding my privacy as zealously as he’d always done.

‘This won’t wait!’ Nelys’s voice insisted, and I sighed.

‘Let him in, Jurgen!’ I called, hoping I wasn’t going to regret this. I’d assigned Nelys to the team overseeing the interrogation of the handful of enemy survivors, and I hadn’t expected him to get any concrete results nearly so soon. After a moment the door swung open, and Nelys came into the room, trying hard not to look excited.

‘Commissar. We’ve found something,’ he said, without preamble, and the merest glance at his fellow cadets. He dropped a data-slate on my desk, looking so absurdly pleased with himself I felt a momentary urge to throw him a biscuit. ‘I thought you should see this right away.’

‘What is it, exactly?’ Visiter asked, frowning at the tiny screen.

‘That,’ I said dramatically, ‘is our enemy.’ I nodded at the tech-priest in the corner, who did something arcane to the conference room’s projection equipment, and the little pict was abruptly reproduced on the hololith built into the tabletop. A man appeared, flickering slightly, clad in an austere uniform of military cut, the eight-pointed symbol of Chaos worked into the breast pocket of his greatcoat and the badge on his hat. ‘Warmaster Varan. Apparently known to his followers as the Conqueror, the Undefeatable, the

Great Leader, and a plethora of other sycophantic epithets.'

'Where did it come from?' Rorkins asked.

'One of my cadets found it among the personal effects of a prisoner he'd been processing,' I told him. 'The survivors of the raid haven't been exactly forthcoming about the reasons for their mission or the resources the main fleet's got, but according to the interrogation transcripts they can hardly be persuaded to shut up about him. According to them, Varan's the greatest leader the galaxy's ever seen.'

'Looks a bit short to me,' Julien said, snorting impatiently at the implied blasphemy. 'And that ridiculous little moustache makes him look like a clown.'

'He seems to be quite a charismatic orator, though,' I said. The pict clip showed Varan standing on a podium, ranting away about the supposed perfidy of the Emperor and all who followed him, in front of a rapturous crowd that must have numbered in the thousands. Many of his audience were still wearing Imperial uniforms, I noted with a shudder, but their enthusiasm for the drivel he was spouting seemed just as genuine as everyone else's.

'Can't see it myself,' Visiter commented, and I was forced to agree. Even allowing for the deficiencies of the slate's rather basic audio feed, Varan's voice had an unctuous, whiny timbre which set my teeth on edge, and his theatrical hand gestures were overdone to the point of self-parody. Instead of interrupting periodically with rapturous applause, I was amazed his audience hadn't started to throw fruit by now.

'I don't think we need to hear any more of this,' Rorkins said, and the tech-priest in the corner obligingly switched off the ranting demagogue. 'It's palpable nonsense.'

'Heard it all before,' I agreed. In fact I had: for a supposed genius, Varan had a pretty restricted vocabulary, and his grasp of analogy and metaphor seemed tenuous at best. His rabble-rousing speech, which had seemed to so impress the new converts in front of him, was little more than a vapid compendium of the kind of slogans the usual degenerate foot soldiers of Chaos would yell while throwing themselves obligingly down the barrels of our guns.

'Clearly staged for propaganda purposes,' Julien agreed. 'No one could really stand listening to that.'

'Nevertheless, the enemy soldier Nelys confiscated it from seemed

genuinely distressed to have lost it,' I said, referring back to the cadet's report. 'He claims to have carried it for inspiration in the field, and as visible proof of Varan's invincibility.' I read on. 'According to Nelys, the fellow seemed quite astonished that he didn't immediately convert to the cause of Chaos the moment he saw the picts.'

'Clearly delusional,' Rorkins said, then shrugged. 'I suppose it's only to be expected.'

'Got that right,' Julien agreed. 'No one in their right mind would ever turn their back on His Majesty, especially on the say-so of a pathetic little runt like that.' The rest of the heads around the table nodded, my own among them, and we went back to the business of preparing for war.

In retrospect, of course, it seems astonishing that we dismissed our antagonist so lightly, especially knowing that he'd already conquered two systems far more heavily defended than our own; all that I can say in our defence is that, in the picts at least, he didn't look like so much of a threat. And once it became clear just how badly we'd underestimated him, it was already far too late.



Editorial Note:

The following transcript is appended without further comment, as, quite frankly, words fail me.

Citizens of Perlia.

Some of you may have heard of me; a few of you may even recognise me. My name is Ciaphas Cain, and almost two generations ago I fought to defend this world from the greenskin invaders who had dared to desecrate it, standing shoulder to shoulder with ordinary men and women like yourselves. Your ancestors' courage and resourcefulness has rightfully gone down in history, celebrated even today.

Now, their noble legacy is under threat from an even greater foe. We've all heard the rumours that the Great Enemy has unleashed one of their so-called crusades against the Imperium, and I regret to inform you that there is an element of truth to these stories. Though our forces are holding back the tide on the far side of the galaxy, keeping them penned in their own foul realm, a few scattered survivors of the enemy fleet have fled in terror from the righteous retribution being visited upon them. One such flotilla has already made the mistake of thinking Perlia undefended, and paid the price for their arrogance in blood, and we have reason to suspect that a second, possibly larger, group is following in their footsteps.

The PDF and their spaceborne comrades in arms are well prepared for any further incursions, but the war against the tyranids has left them in dire need of further support. Accordingly, Commander Rorkins has decided to re-establish the civilian militia, which performed so ably during the dark days of the invasion, in order to free more of the professional soldiers for front-

line duties.

I'm therefore appealing to any able-bodied citizens who feel able to assist, to join us in this heroic endeavour. Recruiting stations are being set up somewhere in your local community, at Tribune sector houses, temple halls, and other such centres; your regional pictcasts and printsheets will carry the details.

The days and weeks ahead will undoubtedly be trying for all of us, but if we stand together, we will surely prevail in the name of His Divine Majesty.

The Emperor Protects.

OceanofPDF.com



ELEVEN

Well, I have to admit that, despite my scepticism, it seemed as though Julien had known what she was talking about after all. Within a day of me making the pictcast, the recruiting stations were practically besieged. Citizens were signing up in droves, eager to lay down their lives for the Emperor, or, more likely, fondly imagining that someone else would lay down theirs instead, leaving them to bore future generations with their war stories.

‘Not that I’m complaining,’ Rorkins said dryly, ‘but you seem to have landed us with quite another problem. Emperor alone knows how we’re going to feed and accommodate them all.’

‘We don’t have to,’ I assured him as we skirted the parade ground of the schola, the chiselled aquilae set into the flagstones still glistening with the morning dew, and sidestepping a couple of progenii paying for some minor infraction in the time-honoured way by scouring them free of lichen with toothbrushes as we did so. ‘Sister Julien and I have made other arrangements.’ Quite clearly we couldn’t induct so many raw recruits into the PDF without sinking its already ramshackle command structure entirely, so we’d decided to leave the militia recruits where they were in the first place, living in their own homes and generally fending for themselves. Whatever moderately competent troopers could be found to instruct them would assemble the motley collection of volunteers once a day, usually in the evenings, to run them through the basics of how to fire a lasgun and keep their heads down when someone started firing back. If it turned out that we had a little more time before the enemy got here once they’d grasped that, the professional troopers could impart any other skills they thought might be useful at their discretion.

‘Sounds a bit risky to me,’ Rorkins said, his breath misting slightly as he

spoke, almost matching the pearlescent haze of the pre-dawn light surrounding us. 'What happens if the enemy turns up while they're not on duty?'

'They assemble in their training areas as soon as the alert comes,' I said. I shrugged, tacitly admitting to a few doubts of my own. 'Emperor knows how many will actually turn up when they know the shooting's about to start, though.'

Rorkins favoured me with a bleak smile. 'I thought that was your area of expertise, commissar. Keeping the cannon fodder up to the mark.'

'Easier said than done, commander,' I replied. 'Soldiers are trained and disciplined, even the PDF rabble. The militia are just civilians with guns.'

'All the more reason they shouldn't be left to run around on their own most of the time,' Rorkins said.

'On the contrary,' I demurred. 'Being able to carry on their usual occupations gives them the illusion of normality. That'll be a vital psychological prop for them when the reality of what they're getting into finally hits home.'

'If you say so,' Rorkins said, sounding far from convinced.

Seizing the opportunity I'd so carefully contrived, I nodded thoughtfully. 'That's why I'm planning to make some personal inspections,' I remarked casually. 'It'll be good for morale to put in an appearance at a few of the militia platoons, and I can harass the PDF field commanders at the same time.' I glanced round the schola as I spoke, watching the freezing mist curl around the buildings as though the nearest towers were lurking in ambush. 'I must admit I'm getting a bit twitchy hanging around here waiting for the noise to start.'

Rorkins smiled sympathetically, one old warrior to another, and nodded his agreement.

'I know what you mean,' he conceded. 'If I have to sit through one more meeting with those frakwits from Rytepat I'm going to shoot somebody. Probably myself.' He sighed, a little enviously. 'Neither of us take too kindly to sitting on our hands.'

'I know it's just makework really,' I said, gauging his reaction carefully, 'but at least it'll feel like doing something. And if it gives us a few more effectives in the field when it all goes ploin-shaped, that's no bad thing.'

'No, I suppose not.' Rorkins shook his head. 'When are you leaving?'

'This morning,' I said. Sprie had the Aquila fired up and ready, Jurgen was

stuffing things into my kitbag even as I spoke, and I couldn't see any reason to delay. 'I just want a quick word with Brasker before I go.'

'Brasker?' Rorkins looked astonished. 'What in Terra's name for?'

'Just some administrative stuff,' I said blandly. Despite rechecking the intelligence data, as he'd promised, Donal had completely failed to find any plausible objectives for the enemy raiders, and it was time for a change of tack. If anyone of my acquaintance would be able to find the records I needed among the billions of pieces of superfluous verbiage the Administratum had filed away and forgotten over the years, it would be the bursar, and he was unimaginative enough not to wonder why I wanted a look at them. I hoped. 'Any idea where he is?'

'His quarters I suppose,' Rorkins said, wrapping his cloak around himself as though the pre-dawn chill was intended as a personal insult. 'At least if he's got any sense.'

'I'll try there, then,' I said. Perfect. I doubted that he'd be any too pleased to be roused this early, but that wasn't my problem, and at least there'd be no other ears around to overhear our conversation. Of course, on the downside, I was about to confide a little of my business to the most indiscreet man in the segmentum, but I was sure a few choice phrases about martial law and the need for secrecy would persuade him to hold his tongue. After all, it wasn't as though the source of any leak about the commission I gave him wouldn't be obvious.

After a few more words with Rorkins we parted, him towards the lecture halls he'd commandeered as a makeshift headquarters, and me to the lodgings across the main quadrangle where Brasker and the other senior administrators had their rooms. As you'd expect, the pecking order was pretty well established when it came to the perceived desirability of the faculty accommodation, with the Ecclesiarchy taking what were generally thought of as the best rooms, affording them a view of the chapel and only a few metres to walk to get to the services. The Administratum adepts came next, in the heart of the schola complex, where, in theory, they could keep an eye on the smooth functioning of the institution with the minimum of effort, and out on the fringes were the pensioned-off veterans like me, Rorkins and Visiter. (Julien, of course, was in with the Emperor-botherers.) The only bunch even further removed from the centre of things was the small staff of Adeptus Mechanicus drones, who kept themselves to themselves most of the time in any case, to everyone's relief, including their

own.⁴³

Given my absurdly inflated status on Perlia, I could no doubt have had myself reassigned to one of the prime suites if I'd chosen to make an issue of it, but of course I did nothing of the sort. For one thing, it wouldn't sit well with the image of modesty about my supposed achievements that I generally liked to cultivate, and for another it suited me very well to be able to sneak off on business of my own from time to time without it being too obvious that I was skiving. Most of all, though, I liked the rooms I'd been assigned; the view of the mountains was a pleasant one, the company of the ageing veterans around me congenial, and I didn't have to put up with the bells and smells⁴⁴ from the chapel disturbing me every five minutes. Not to mention that it was close to both the shuttle pad and the transport pool, which I found a definite plus point. I've always slept more soundly for knowing there was an escape route close to hand if things turned bad. (Which in my experience was only a matter of time in most cases.)

This early in the morning there were few people around, apart from the schola servants trotting about the place on errands of their own, so I was able to make my way into the main lobby of the Adeptus lodgings without exciting much notice.⁴⁵ It was only as I paused at the bottom of the carved wooden staircase that I realised I had no idea where in the rambling building Brasker's rooms were located. Fortunately a few moments' reconnaissance was sufficient to locate a porter's office tucked away under the rising treads, unoccupied of course at this hour of the day, along with a board of polished thornburr, into which the names of the various residents had been meticulously chased and inlaid in some lighter-coloured wood. According to the little sliding panel next to Brasker's, which could be moved to alternately obscure two different sets of letters, the bursar was IN, so I made a careful note of the number of his suite and climbed the stairs to find it.

Out of habit I moved somewhat stealthily, since, more often than not, whenever I've found myself in an unfamiliar building there's been a better than even chance that someone was lurking in ambush up ahead intending to shoot me if they got the chance. Perhaps because of that I was listening out for any change to the ambient sound a little more intently than usual, so as I raised my hand to knock, I fancied I heard movement inside Brasker's quarters. Well, that was no bad thing; at least if he was up already he couldn't resent me waking him.

Just before my knuckles hit the wood panels, though, I was sure I'd heard something more, a murmur of muted conversation. Before I could still the gesture I'd already rapped twice, however, so my immediate impulse, to wait and see if I'd been right, was no longer an option.

'Yes?' Brasker opened the door just wide enough to peer out at me, and we goggled at one another for a moment of stunned mutual astonishment. 'Commissar Cain.' He enunciated my name carefully, surprise making his voice seem a little bit louder than usual, before recalling his manners and dropping his tone to a more normal conversational level. 'I thought you were one of the servants.'

'I don't believe so,' I said, still reeling from the sight of his night attire. He was wearing a nightshirt of purple silk, a monogram of some sort worked in gold thread on the breast pocket. 'I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour, but I'm about to leave the schola for a day or two, and I needed an urgent word.'

'I see.' He clearly didn't, but wasn't going to be impolite enough to admit the fact. 'Then I suppose you'd better come in.' He made no move to stand aside, though, just glancing at something inside the chambers, then seemed to recollect himself with an effort and pulled the door open.

I wasn't sure what I expected to find inside; piles of paper and data-slates, probably. The reality was a small hall, leading to a neatly appointed living room roughly the size of my own, the closed doors leading off the lobby presumably those of bathroom and bedroom, although which was which I had no idea, since my own suite of rooms was laid out on a more linear pattern. The blinds were still drawn, and Brasker kindled a luminator as we entered the lounge area.

'Sorry about the mess,' he said apologetically. 'I had a visitor last night.' In actual fact the room seemed perfectly tidy to me, apart from a pair of abandoned goblets which, judging by the smell, still contained a few sticky dregs of amasec, standing next to a decanter on an occasional table in the corner, and a neatly stacked tarot deck on a dining table in the middle of the room, next to a couple of stained plates.

'Sure they didn't stay?' I asked, unable to resist teasing him a little. 'I thought I heard voices just before I knocked.'

'I was watching the newspicts,' Brasker said, colouring slightly, which clashed hideously with his nightgown. There was no sign of a pict set anywhere in the room I could see, but I let it go; whatever he was hiding

(and I didn't need much imagination to work it out) was his own affair, quite literally if I was any judge. I'd have bet half my pension his guest was still in the bedroom, waiting for me to frak off so she could get back to work in the kitchens or wherever she belonged, so out of common politeness I got straight down to business, keeping my voice as low as possible.

'I need some old records run down,' I said, without preamble. 'It's not going to be easy, but it's important for the defence of the planet, so it has to be done by someone reliable, with wide-ranging contacts in the Administratum. You were the first man I thought of.'

'Really.' Brasker looked at me, an odd expression on his face. 'I'm surprised you think I'm sufficiently trustworthy. I'm well aware I have something of a reputation for being both frivolous and indiscreet.'

'Reputations can be misleading,' I said. 'And in this case yours will be a positive asset. No one will think it odd if you seem to be asking questions, and no one will suspect that you've been entrusted with something which has to be kept confidential.'

To my relief, the bursar was nodding slowly. I'm pretty good at reading people, it goes with the job, and I began to feel that perhaps coming to him with my little problem wasn't such a huge gamble after all. 'You can rely on me,' he said after a moment. 'But I can swear it on the aquila if you like.'

'I'm sure that won't be necessary,' I said, surprised in my turn. 'Your word's good enough for me. After all, if you accept the commission, you'll be acting in the name of the Commissariat.' In other words, if he let me down I'd be entitled to shoot him, although I didn't have to spell it out; the quick glance he gave to the weapons at my belt was enough to tell me that he'd got that particular message well enough.

'If I can help defend this world in any way, I'm at your disposal, of course,' Brasker said. He leaned a little closer to me. 'Which records do you want me to research?'

'They're all in here,' I said, handing him a data-slate. 'There's something about these locations that's significant to the enemy, although in the name of the Throne I've got no idea what. I suspect that it's something very old, though, perhaps dating back to the first colonisation. And I want to know if there are any folk tales about these places too.'

'Folk tales?' Brasker looked puzzled for a moment. 'I'll do my best. But it sounds as though the records you're after will be fragmentary at the very

least.'

'That's why I need someone of your calibre to make the search,' I said, thinking a little bit of flattery wouldn't come amiss at that stage.

'I won't let you down,' Brasker assured me, looking more serious than I'd ever seen him. 'If there's anything there, I'll find it.'

'I appreciate that,' I told him, preparing to leave. On the verge of exiting the lounge, I paused, struck by a new and unwelcome thought. 'If I don't make it back, or the enemy attacks before I return, take whatever you've managed to uncover to Colonel Rorkins or Sister Julien, and tell them I sent you. They'll know what to do with the information.' I hoped. Well, I wasn't planning to get killed any time soon, so with any luck our little arrangement would just remain between the two of us. And if it all worked out, and we somehow managed to keep Perlia out of the clutches of this Varan, whoever he was, I could make good use of Brasker's connections in the future, upgrading him from an occasional source of gossip to a prime intelligence source for Amberley. She always appreciated little surprises, and would certainly be grateful for some of the nuggets of information I could get the bursar to mine on her behalf.

Of course I wouldn't dream of telling him who I was acting for, but even if he worked it out, that might not be too much of a problem. He'd already surprised me once today by apparently having successfully concealed an illicit affair for Emperor knew how long, so he was obviously capable of discretion if it were needed.

As I left, I couldn't help glancing at the closed doors in the hallway, wondering which concealed his inamorata, and what she could possibly have seen in him in the first place but such speculation was fruitless, and I had a shuttle to catch.

As the dawn chill was still acute, I paused in the entrance hall of the lodgings for a few moments to vox Jurgen, and make sure that the arrangements for our departure were still proceeding as planned. He assured me that all was well, and that he was on his way to the shuttle pad, so I voxed Sprie too, to let him know I'd be with him almost at once.

'Ready when you are, commissar,' he assured me cheerfully.

I'd just cut the link when I became aware of footsteps descending the stairs, and, impelled by my habitual sense of discretion, I stepped into the shadows of the porter's cubby hole. I didn't want anyone asking awkward questions about my business in the Administratum block, especially after

impressing on Brasker just how important it was that no one think anything of his enquiries on my behalf. Besides, if I'm honest, it had also occurred to me that this might be Brasker's lady friend leaving the premises, and I couldn't resist trying to get a glimpse of her.

Well, I did, and it was a shock, I can tell you that. After a few more echoing footfalls the unmistakable figure of Sister Julien came into view, swathed in a dark cloak which almost succeeded in blurring the outline of her scabbarded chainsword, and hurried out into the gathering brightness of the courtyard. For a moment I simply stared after her in stunned astonishment: no wonder Brasker had been so evasive. But then, I already knew that she drank and played cards, so I suppose it wasn't too much of a stretch to find that she harboured a taste for more basic diversions as well.⁴⁶

Grinning quietly to myself, I went off to meet Jurgen and Sprie, and despite the magnitude of the task in front of me, my heart was almost light as our shuttle lifted from the pad. Just as well, too as it turned out: there'd be precious little to smile about in the days that followed.



TWELVE

Despite my impatience to get to the Valley of Daemons as quickly as possible, caution and the demands of my cover story meant that we took a roundabout route, dropping in on several different communities on the way. Everywhere we landed, whether in a city or a village, our reception was the same: a brass band, horribly under-rehearsed, mangling some suitably martial piece of music, a local dignitary making a platitudinous speech about how pleased they were to see me, and a muster of the new militia recruits. They all seemed keen enough, but at the moment they were still comfortably insulated from the bloody realities of combat by the imagined romanticism of it all.

Eventually, on the second day, we pitched up in Chilinvale, the closest town to my real objective, and paused for a bite of lunch before resuming my ostensible tour of inspection. It was a pleasant enough little community, nestling in the foothills of the mountain range which separated the interior of the eastern continent from its coastal plains and the narrow isthmus leading to the more populous and industrialised western one. Much of it seemed new, the architecture of its southern side surprisingly uniform, and of a style less than a century old. I remarked on the fact to our guide, a Corporal Manrin, detached from the nearest PDF garrison to take charge of the local militia recruits, and he nodded around a mouthful of bread and cheese.

‘Rebuilding work,’ he told me, swallowing hastily. ‘After the liberation.’

‘The orks made a bit of a mess of things, I take it,’ I said, having seen more than enough of the wanton destruction left in their wake on my eventful journey across the continent eight decades before.

Manrin shook his head. ‘Actually, it was you,’ he said. ‘The flood waters

came through here after you blew the dam. There wasn't a lot of the town left after that.' Then, perhaps conscious of an implied criticism in his choice of words, he shrugged. 'Luckily the place was full of greenies at the time, so it was a good thing if you ask me.'

'I'm glad you approve,' I told him dryly. The militia group he led was fairly typical of the ones I'd seen so far, a couple of dozen men and women ranging in age from their late teens to their dotage, more than making up in enthusiasm what they lacked in expertise. Unfortunately, once the las-bolts started flying, enthusiasm wasn't going to be enough, and I didn't envy Manrin the job of trying to keep them alive and facing forward. They were slouching around on the touchline of a scrumball pitch, which had been requisitioned as a makeshift firing range, trying to look as though they weren't staring at me, which was difficult, and failing to manage even the pretence where Jurgen was concerned. For this I could hardly blame them, however, as he wasn't exactly recruiting poster material to begin with, and, as I've previously remarked, the passage of years had more than made their mark on him.

'More recaf, commissar?' My aide approached us, brandishing the pot, and Manrin flinched a little, but held his ground.

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, holding out my cup, although I didn't really need another drink at the moment, and framing my next remark for Manrin's benefit. 'Perhaps we could take a little time out to visit our old battleground before we leave. I hadn't realised we were quite so close to the dam here.' That should avoid any awkward questions about what we were doing if anyone noticed we were missing, or became aware of our destination; paying tribute to my fallen comrades was the sort of thing people expected me to do. In my experience, if you want to keep something secret, it's never a good idea to look furtive.

'I'll see what I can arrange,' Jurgen said. 'I'm sure I can find some transport once you've finished eating.' He wandered away, after scooping a handful of sandwiches from a nearby trestle table into one of his webbing pouches.

'You could just fly,' Manrin suggested, nodding towards Sprie, whose red hair stood out like a landing flare among the crowd, making him hard to miss. He was chatting to a couple of the younger female recruits, who seemed fascinated by his naval uniform, to his evident bemusement; being away from the circumscribed world of the schola, if only for a short time,

was clearly a novel experience he had every intention of making the most of.

‘We could,’ I said, as though it were of little consequence. ‘But I’m sure our pilot would appreciate a break.’ That much was true, the lad had been hopping us around the globe for a day and a half by that point. Rather more saliently, though, he had no idea of the real purpose of the trip, and it seemed best to prolong that state of ignorance indefinitely if I could. I hadn’t realised at first that the town council were going to lay on a buffet lunch outside the pavilion at the edge of the sports field, and once I had it would have been churlish not to have invited Sprie to join us: while he was busy stuffing his face, and trying to work out what girls were for, Jurgen and I could slip away on our own errand.

‘How are the recruits shaping up?’ I asked the corporal, and Manrin shrugged.

‘About as well as you’d expect,’ he said. ‘They’re keen, but they don’t think like soldiers. Most of them might as well be walking around with targets on their shirts.’ He sighed. ‘But they’ll take a few of the reamers with them, I can promise you.’

‘I’d expect nothing else,’ I told him, hoping it wouldn’t come to that. ‘How are you off for supplies?’

‘Adequate,’ Manrin told me, after a moment’s thought. ‘We’ve enough lasguns to go around, and about three spare power packs apiece. If they remember their fire discipline and don’t just spray it, that ought to be enough to hold until reinforcements arrive.’ He didn’t need to add that many of the amateur soldiers would be able to supplement their supplies with power packs issued to the casualties once the shooting started; that much was depressingly obvious. ‘The thing that worries me is...’ He broke off, clearly wondering if he’d overstepped the mark.

‘Go on,’ I said, in an encouraging tone. ‘In my experience, the concerns of the troopers on the ground are never to be taken lightly.’

‘Well sir,’ Manrin said, apparently reassured, ‘all these guns and ammo packs have to come from somewhere. Thousands of them, all over the planet.’

‘It’s a logistical nightmare,’ I admitted. ‘Half the recruits are still drilling with broom handles. But we will get weapons out to everyone before the enemy arrives, you can be sure of that.’

‘Oh, I am,’ he said, with every appearance of sincerity. ‘But the only place

they could all be coming from this quickly is the emergency caches.'

'That's right,' I agreed. Generations before, the Perlian PDF had established a network of supply dumps all over the planet, so that in the event of an invasion local units would be able to keep on fighting even after the chain of command was severed, a policy I'd been more than grateful for during my adventures in the occupied zone during the first siege. If it hadn't been for those scattered caches of food and ammunition, my makeshift army would have starved or been cut to pieces long before we'd made it to safety.

'Then we really will be fighting in the last ditch,' Manrin said.

I nodded, soberly. That hoard of supplies was being pillaged even as we spoke, to enable the volunteers to engage the enemy with something marginally more deadly than harsh language, and that would leave almost nothing to nourish a nascent resistance movement with if things got so bad we needed to establish one. 'I'm afraid so,' I agreed. 'But we can beat them, and we will.'

'Quite right, sir.' A man so elderly that he seemed at first sight to be barely capable of standing unsupported snapped me a parade-ground salute. 'Heretics is all cowards, I've seen it before. They don't like the straight silver, sir, they'll turn and run the minute you fix bayonets.' He chuckled phlegmatically. 'Then you can shoot 'em in the back.'

'Admirably put,' I said, keeping my face as straight as I could. He might have looked almost as unprepossessing as Jurgen, but his shoulders were back, and his eyes still keen. 'I can see by your bearing you're a military man.'

'Trooper Jaq, sir, 361st Coranian. Twenty years a Guardsman. Mustered out on Perlia in 943, been here ever since.' He nodded vehemently. 'Still not too old to rally to the colours, though.' He indicated his armband proudly.⁴⁷ 'We'll have those scallywags on the run before you can say "The Emperor protects".'

'I'm sure we will,' I said, with every sign of sincerity I could fake. The truth was, if the enemy decided to attack Chilinvale, for whatever reason, these eager idiots were going to be slaughtered. Their only purpose was to buy time for the regular PDF to get organised enough for a counterattack, and from what I'd seen so far that was a faint hope at best.

'Fall the men in, Jaq,' Manrin said, then corrected himself. 'Volunteers, that is.' Like most of the PDF babysitters I'd met so far, he was unused to

the idea of having women among his command.⁴⁸

‘Very good, sir.’ Jaq saluted again, and shuffled off, in a remarkably sprightly fashion for a man of his years, bawling ‘Get fell in for the officer, quick as you can, we haven’t got all day!’

‘He’s a good man,’ Manrin said, a faintly apologetic tone entering his voice. ‘And at least he remembers how to hold a weapon.’

Something most of the others seemed to have at least a tenuous grasp of by now; they coalesced into an inchoate clump, shuffled into a couple of roughly parallel lines, and held out their lasguns for inspection.

‘Eyes front!’ Manrin bellowed. ‘Franka, that means you!’ One of the teenage girls who’d been attempting to flirt with Sprie tore her gaze away from the naval cadet with obvious reluctance.

‘My mum says it’s not polite to ignore visitors, Mr Manrin.’

‘He’s not a visitor, he’s an inspecting officer!’ Manrin said, keeping his voice down with a considerable effort. Clearly some of the militia recruits had an exceptionally feeble grasp of military protocol. ‘Ten press-ups, now!’

The young woman sighed, but began to puff her way through the press-ups nevertheless.

‘I can see you have a lot to contend with,’ I said, sympathetically.

Manrin nodded. ‘Discipline’s a major problem,’ he admitted. ‘They’re only volunteers, so I can’t be too hard on them, or they’ll just walk out.’

‘It was a lot easier for me, the first time round,’ I said. ‘I could just threaten to shoot them if they got out of line, and they had nowhere else to go in any case.’

‘So I’ve heard.’ Manrin nodded, a trace of envy suffusing his voice, and waited while Franka scrambled to her feet again, picked up her lasgun, and held it out like the others. I strolled down the line, trying not to wince at how sloppy they were, apart from Jaq, who might still have been in uniform, so smart was his bearing.

‘A fine body of troops,’ I told Manrin, pitching my voice so that it would carry just far enough to reach them. Most of them smirked in a distinctly unmilitary fashion, and Franka simpered at Sprie again as soon as the corporal’s back was turned. ‘I’m sure they’ll acquit themselves well.’

‘By the Emperor’s grace,’ Manrin said, astute enough to realise I was more interested in boosting morale than strict adherence to the facts.

The Emperor was going to have his work cut out with this lot, I thought,

and made my farewells as quickly as I decently could.

Jurgen, meanwhile, had been true to his word, obtaining the use of a civilian groundcar from somewhere while I was being quietly appalled by the state of readiness of Manrin's rabble, and he drove us out of Chilinvale with his usual disregard for anything else which might be sharing the carriageway with us. Normally that wouldn't have worried me too much, as my preferred mode of transport was a scout Salamander, the armour plate of which would be sufficiently robust to withstand any minor impacts we sustained on the way, but in this case all that stood between me and severe injury was the fragile bodywork of a light utility vehicle. Well, that, and my aide's phenomenal reflexes. Suffice it to say that we eventually made it out of the town unscathed, unless you count a few more grey hairs to add to my ever-growing collection, and as the traffic thinned I began to relax and enjoy the journey.

Spring was a little further advanced in this part of the world, so I cranked the window down (always a wise move when inside an enclosed space with Jurgen in any case), and savoured the fresh air spilling down the sides of the distant mountains. They seemed like a solid wall, purple against the horizon like a looming thunderhead, enclosing the world, just as they had done all those years ago when I'd led my ragtag army towards them. This time, however, they appeared far less ominous. Back then they'd seemed like a death trap, funnelling us into an inescapable ambush, with nothing beyond except the bulk of the orkish armies even if we had managed to break through. As it was, we'd managed to outflank the invaders, more by luck than judgement if I'm honest, and inflict a telling blow against them in the process.

'Up here, I think, sir,' Jurgen said, swinging the wheel violently, slewing across two lanes of oncoming vehicles, and blithely ignoring the blaring of horns, squealing of tyres, and paint-blistering profanity which echoed in our wake. Our suspension began to bounce and rumble over a badly-maintained mountain road, until I started to fear for the structural integrity of my fillings.

'It doesn't look all that familiar,' I said, as steadily as I could under the circumstances, and Jurgen nodded.

'It's changed a bit,' he agreed. 'And we're approaching it from a different direction as well.'

‘Of course.’ I nodded, conceding his point, and only then realising that, subconsciously at least, I’d expected the Valley of Daemons to look pretty much as it had done the last time I’d driven up it. But that was before we’d let Emperor know how many megatonnes of water loose to scour its way through the declivities of the region, rearranging the topography quite comprehensively along the way. In fact, so different did everything appear from the images in my mind, that it was only as we crested a ridge and I caught sight of a glint of reflected sunlight from a large body of water in the distance below us that I realised we had already entered the valley.

Where once a narrow trickle of water had hugged the bed of a winding river, flowing out though the neck of a steep-sided gorge purple with heather and green with scrub, dotted with the occasional tenacious tree, foaming rapids bounced along a defile of grey bedrock, scoured clean of topsoil. On either side, the sheer rock walls were speckled with mosses and lichen, which softened the starkness of their outline, but did little to lessen the impression of bleakness. Higher, beyond the level the solid wall of water had reached, the moorland resumed, the point of transition as sharply delineated as if etched with a knife.

There was no mistaking the vast lake that filled the head of the valley, however, or the solid bulk of the Adeptus Mechanicus shrine nestling into the hillside next to it; that part of the terrain hadn’t altered at all, and as I caught sight of it I was able to orientate myself at last. Instead of following our old route up from the mouth of the valley and across the dam, we’d entered it higher up, and on the opposite side.

I scanned the distant slope, looking for some sign of the old road which had wound its way up and across the top of the dam to reach the shrine, but there was no sign of it at all, every last trace of it having been swept away in the flood. The route we were coming in by had obviously been constructed later, as a replacement, while the dam was being rebuilt; it swept down to the piazza outside the main doors of the shrine without skirting the lake at all, or, to my unspoken relief given the way Jurgen was driving, taking us anywhere near the vertiginous drop before the vast grey wall spanning the cleft and holding back the waters.

The new dam was more or less identical to its predecessor, or so it seemed to me, although I thought there was an extra sluice gate at the bottom, and an extra buttress or two, no doubt to add a bit more structural integrity in case someone else decided to take a pot-shot at it with an artillery piece. In

spite of these obvious precautions, and, no doubt, the existence of others I couldn't see, I still felt uneasy looking at the huge edifice, being able to picture the tidal wave which would be unleashed if the rockcrete gave way all too readily. The memory of the one we'd sent roaring down the valley on our previous visit was still vivid, the huge ork army which had sought to destroy us being swept away like flecks of foam in a mountain torrent.

'They put it back up, then,' Jurgen said, sounding far from impressed, and bouncing us down the track towards the shrine.

'Hence our little problem,' I agreed, scanning the bedrock walls for any sign of the fresh xenos artefacts the flood had apparently revealed, but without success.⁴⁹ In fact, so engrossed was I in this pursuit that I hadn't noticed how close we were getting to our destination until the shuddering of our suspension against the pitted roadbed abruptly ceased, and I found us hurtling across the intricate mosaic of the piazza in front of the shrine itself. 'Perhaps you'd better slow down,' I suggested. 'We don't want to alarm anyone.'

That was a considerable understatement. The first time we'd stumbled across this place, and the secret it concealed, the only thing left moving in the aftermath of Killian's assault had been a badly damaged combat servitor, which had almost done for me before a militia kill team had finally managed to finish it off. I had no doubt that similar, fully functional, systems still protected the site, and I had no wish to provoke them.

'Very good, sir.' Jurgen slammed on the brakes, leaving streaks of residue from our abused tyres marring the mosaic, and bringing us to a halt a few dozen metres from the main doors. They were just as big and impressive as I remembered: twin slabs of polished bronze, fully eight metres high, and embossed with the cogwheel sigil of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

I clambered out, adjusting my cap, weapons belt and dignity as best I could, and waited for Jurgen to join me. As he fell in at my side, his lasgun slung from his shoulder as usual, the doors began to swing open.

'It looks as though our arrival has been noticed,' I said, beginning to walk towards them, then hesitated. The figures moving beyond the portal seemed too large to be human, bulky as an ogryn at least, and as they stepped into the sunshine my knees went weak. The guardians I'd most dreaded were indeed protecting the site; three hulking slabs of meat and metal, their flesh and augmetics so closely melded it was almost impossible to tell where the dividing line came, fanned out ahead of us, barring our way.

‘Looks like they mended those too,’ Jurgen remarked, as casually as if he was commenting on the weather.

‘So it seems,’ I replied, determined to seem no less imperturbable than my aide, and began to walk towards them. I was by no means sure he was correct; these all seemed to be different from the one I’d encountered before. That had been a hybrid, mounting an autocannon on one arm and a chainfist on the other: two of these carried ranged weapons, a plasma gun and a heavy bolter, while the third was clearly built to specialise in close combat, its paired chainblades whining unnervingly as they powered up. A second or so later a familiar, and surprisingly welcome, odour of old socks and armpits told me that Jurgen was watching my back as always. Emboldened, I raised a hand. ‘I’m Commissar...’ I just had time to begin, before the leading construct drowned me out, its voice emanating from a voxcoder of remarkable resonance.

‘Scan completed. Intruders armed. Terminate.’

‘Now wait just a minute,’ I began, as the barrels of the weapons the things carried rotated towards me, and the close combat model started moving forwards. But of course I might just as well have saved my breath.

‘Terminate intruders. Protect the sanctum,’ the first one grated, the exact same phrase I’d heard some eighty years before, and the others echoed it. ‘Terminate... Terminate...’

Then, almost at the same instant, the two gun servitors fired.



THIRTEEN

Of course I hadn't just been standing around waiting to be shot: even as the hulking automata brought their weapons to bear I'd been moving, sprinting towards the most solid piece of cover I could see, a remarkably ugly obelisk of polished steel which someone had apparently dumped at the edge of the paved area since the last time I'd been there. Running back to the car would have been pointless; the heavy weapons the things carried would have shredded and vaporised the thin metal within seconds, along with anyone foolish enough to be crouching behind it. Of course that might be true of the lump of ironmongery I was heading towards as well, but I didn't know for certain that it wouldn't protect me, unlike the vehicle, so all things considered it seemed worth taking a chance. Especially as the alternative seemed to be standing around in the open waiting for the advancing servitors to make a mess on the mosaic with my entrails.

Fortunately they seemed as slow to react as such constructs generally are, wasting their first volley on the spot I'd occupied before I started running; the image of some kind of machine part exploded in a hail of bolter fire, the thin tiles transmogrifying instantaneously into flying shards which tugged at my greatcoat and stung my ears and the back of my neck, before the plasma round arrived an instant later, obliterating even more of the picture in a cloud of ravening incandescence. Knowing that the cumbersome energy weapon would take precious seconds to recharge, I drew my laspistol and snapped off a couple of shots at the one armed with the bolter; not that I had any real hope of incapacitating the thing, of course, but at least I might make it hesitate while it assessed the new threat.

Fat chance: it fired again almost at once, but, anticipating this, I'd jinked to the side just in time, and it missed me again, by an even narrower margin.

I dived behind the obelisk just as the plasma cannon recharged, and a searing bolt of star-stuff roared past the glittering lump of ironmongery, finally expending itself in the lake beyond. A thousand litres of water flashed instantly into steam, wreathing the whole scene in a chilling mist, which blocked out the sunlight as abruptly as a slamming door, and I began to think we might have a chance after all. It was a slim hope, but the artificial fog might just confuse the constructs' sensoria long enough for me to get the drop on them somehow, or at least get to safety.

I looked up, searching for some sign of Jurgen, but he'd vanished in the murk; it looked as if I was on my own.

'Cease fire!' I snapped, broadcasting on every frequency of which my comm-bead was capable. 'This is Commissar Cain, here on the authority of Inquisitor Vail!' I wasn't sure how Amberley was likely to take me using her name so casually, but under the circumstances I was prepared to risk her ire. I listened for a response, but no answer came, so I peered cautiously round the lump of metal and drew my chainsword.

'Terminate intruders. Protect the sanctum,' a synthetic voice grated somewhere behind me and, warned in the nick of time by the constructs' annoying habit of repeating their instructions *ad nauseum*, I ducked just fast enough to prevent a swinging chainblade from taking my head off. I parried the follow-up strike by reflex, instinctively recognising the combination move as a standard one from the Munitorum manual on paired blade techniques, and, reasoning that the flesh and metal monstrosity had undoubtedly been programmed to counter all the conventional responses, shot it in the left knee with my laspistol instead. The joint was armoured, of course, so it didn't fall like a man would have done, but it staggered, and when it struck at me again, raising sparks from the lump of metal behind me, its mobility was clearly impaired.

Even though its attacks were now easier to evade, I wasn't about to write it off just yet, though; it was still blindingly fast, and only reflexes honed in innumerable practice sessions, and more desperate scuffles for my miserable life than I care to count, enabled me to continue parrying the flurry of strokes it kept aiming in my direction. 'Jurgen!' I shouted, the muffling mist swallowing my voice. 'Where the frak are you?'

'Be with you in a moment, sir,' my aide's voice assured me, sounding as calm as ever in the tiny speaker of my comm-bead. 'I just had to go back for something.' If he was about to elaborate, he never got the chance: the

ripping sound of the heavy-calibre bolter firing echoed flatly across the valley again, its muzzle flash sparking through the grey haze like lightning playing around a distant hill, and a moment later the muffled detonation of an explosion followed. Orange light flickered through the blanketing mist, and my heart seemed to stop for a moment. Surely my aide hadn't been foolish enough to return to the car, even under the cover of the artificial fog...

I began to realise that the murk was beginning to lift now, the faint disc of the sun slowly becoming visible again, and resolved to finish this fast, while the unexpected advantage remained. Something was moving in the haze behind me, and for a moment I dared to hope that it was Jurgen, before the familiar voxcoder voice grated 'Terminate intruders. Protect the sanctum' for the umpteenth time. Well, perhaps one of my problems could solve the other. Pivoting out of the way of another swipe from a chainblade, I snapped off a shot at the newcomer, which seemed to expend itself harmlessly against its heavily armoured torso.

It reacted precisely as I'd hoped it would. I flung myself aside, seeking whatever refuge I could find behind the next face of the metal obelisk, just as another bolt of plasma hissed past, missing me by millimetres,⁵⁰ and impacting against the chest of the construct I'd been fighting, with a satisfactory sizzle of vaporising metal and flesh. To my astonishment, however, the thing remained standing, although it was severely damaged. No matter, its internal systems were now clearly visible, and I drew back my chainsword, ready to strike at some vital component. To my astonishment, however, before I could administer the *coup de grace* it turned away from me, and took a few faltering steps towards the servitor which had injured it so grievously.

'Higher priority target identified. Engaging,' it grated, and my heart leapt. Unable to tell a friendly fire accident from an intentional attack, its rudimentary cognition systems had misidentified the other construct as an enemy, and it was forgetting about me to take on what it perceived as the greater threat.

Before the gun unit could assess the sudden change in circumstances, it had already taken a couple of swipes from the humming blades, which severed the power cables leading to its plasma weapon. With its primary armament disabled, the beleaguered construct defaulted to whatever protocols commanded it under such circumstances, closing with its

erstwhile comrade in an unseemly brawl, which reminded me of nothing so much as a couple of ogryns on R&R.

I glanced round at the battlefield. The mist had almost lifted by now, but a pall of thick black smoke from the burning car had more than made up for that, laying an impenetrable screen across half the piazza, obscuring everything which lay beyond. There was no sign of Jurgen, or the bolter-wielding servitor, but the bronze doors of the Mechanicus shrine still stood invitingly ajar only a few score metres away. Of course they merely offered an illusion of safety, particularly if there were other security systems inside the building and I couldn't find someone in authority to call off the watchdogs, but if I stayed out here it was only a matter of time before I took rather more bolter rounds than would be good for my health. Putting my trust in the Emperor, I started to run.

Of course I should have remembered that, as I've remarked before, He has a nasty sense of humour; I'd barely gone a dozen paces before the third servitor stepped out of the curtain of smoke and levelled the heavy bolter at me. I glanced round, but there was nowhere to go: the obelisk was too far away now to return to, and if I tried, I'd just end up taking the rounds in the back. Not for the first time I began to regret leaving my precious, and by now rather shabby, set of carapace armour⁵¹ back at the schola; whatever protection it might have afforded would have been minimal at best, but in my experience every little helps under circumstances like this. Knowing that the gesture was futile I raised my laspistol, determined to at least dent the bloody thing before it killed me, but before I could pull the trigger it staggered, most of its cortex disappearing in a gout of superheated air.

'Thank you, sir.' Jurgen appeared through the smoke, nodding in satisfaction as though he'd just turned out a perfectly-cooked omelette, his melta still aimed at the toppling servitor in case it showed any further signs of belligerence. So that was what he'd risked going back to the car for. 'You distracted it just long enough for me to line up a head shot.'

'Happy to be of help,' I said, as casually as I could, turning towards the door again. I could see movement in the shadows, and brought the laspistol up, prepared for whatever further surprises might be about to emerge: or so I thought.

'Stop that right this minute!' a strong female voice rang out, sounding understandably testy. 'I think you've done more than enough damage for one day.' A woman in the white robes of a tech-priest bustled out into the

sunlight, which glinted on the augmetic enhancements fused to her face, and strode towards us. For a moment I thought she was addressing me, but her gaze, so far as I could tell, was directed at the squabbling constructs behind us, which, by now, had done a pretty good job of rendering one another into their component parts. ‘Omniissiah’s cogs, deactivate, you stupid pieces of resyk!’

To my relief, the two surviving servitors, or what was left of them at least, complied, subsiding to the tiles with a rather unpleasant mixture of clanks and squelching noises. With a faint sigh of exasperation the tech-priest turned towards me, her robe flapping in the breeze.

‘Honestly, Ciaphas,’ she said, ‘what is the matter with you? Every time you set foot in the place you break something!’

From the first moment I’d caught sight of the woman I’d been struggling with a vague sense of familiarity, but of course where tech-priests are concerned, all that ironmongery they’re festooned with tends to make recognising them rather difficult; even one you’re on intimate terms with might have a completely different head the next time you meet. Certainly there was little about her features which struck me as familiar. The top of her head had been replaced by a metallic skull, from which augmetic sensors glittered roughly where her eyes would have been, and specialised mechadendrites of some sort waved above her shoulders, flanking a rather battered-looking general-purpose one. Her original mouth and jaw remained in place though, the skin furrowed with age, and her voice raised the echo of old memories, which in itself was unusual.

If I was reading the iconography woven into her robe correctly, which I was by no means sure I was, she was pretty high up in the Mechanicus hierarchy, and tech-priests of that status had usually traded in their larynxes for vocoders decades before.

Then the coin suddenly dropped. Who else among the Mechanicus would be using my given name, particularly on Perlia, or, for that matter, be behaving in a manner so completely untypical of most of her kind?

‘Felicia?’ I hazarded, hardly daring to believe I was right. ‘What in the name of the Throne are you doing here?’

‘My job,’ she replied, the faintly mocking tone I remembered so well infusing her voice. ‘Although I suppose that’s about to be disrupted again.’

‘It will be when the enemy gets here,’ I said. I glanced at her sharply. ‘You do know about the invasion fleet about to descend on us all?’

‘We’ve heard the rumours,’ she said, in a faintly off-hand manner, ‘and there was a rogue trader round here peddling scare stories a while back.’

‘I’m afraid they’re a bit more than just scare stories,’ I said. I cleared my throat. ‘I assume he told you who he was here on behalf of?’

‘Some over-officious inquisitor, he said.’

Felicia looked at me, and, despite the blank metal visage that had replaced the face I remembered, I thought I could detect a spark of the old sense of mischief she’d so often displayed in the course of our long and eventful march towards safety so many decades before. ‘The same one you’re working for, if that transmission of yours was true.’

‘I’m afraid it is,’ I said heavily. There was no point in trying to conceal my connection with Amberley, everyone in the building would be in on the secret of the Shadowlight in any case, and well aware of who they reported to. Which didn’t in the least diminish my astonishment at finding Felicia here. ‘I see you’ve progressed a bit in the priesthood after all.’

‘Yes, I have.’ Felicia smirked a bit, before appearing to recall that the Omnissiah frowned upon such displays of emotion. ‘Which is one in the eye for all those rustbrains in the seminary who told me I wouldn’t amount to anything.’

I nodded, having gathered in the course of our earlier acquaintance that her somewhat exuberant personality hadn’t gone down at all well with the senior tech-priests, who’d told her in no uncertain terms that she’d never be anything other than a humble engineeer: a prognostication which had singly failed to dismay her, as she’d always been more interested in getting her hands grubby than the theological side of her vocation in any case. Clearly her unexpected promotion hadn’t done much to change that, which was something of a relief to me; I’d always found her atypical ebullience a great deal easier to deal with than the emotionless intellect of most of the tech-priests I’d come into contact with over the years.

‘So what happened?’ I asked, angling my path to intersect Jurgen’s.

To my surprise Felicia fell in at my shoulder, as naturally and companionably as if we’d last seen each other a few days ago, rather than the best part of a century.

‘We stumbled across this place,’ she reminded me, pausing next to the metal column behind which I’d sought refuge such a short time before. ‘None of the rest of you could possibly have known what it was, or cared, but once they realised a tech-priest had been inside, the project leaders got a

little nervous.’ I tried to picture a cabal of nervous inquisitors, and failed miserably. ‘They thought I might have seen enough to work out what was going on here, so when the facility re-opened, they recruited me.’

‘How very far-sighted of them,’ I commented, my eye suddenly catching sight of a name engraved on the nearest face of the obelisk. It was a familiar one, Kolfax, the guide who’d led us out of the desert, only to be felled by the orks during our desperate battle here, and with a shiver I finally realised what it was which had saved my life: a memorial to the fallen of that decisive and bloody action. With a faint pang, I found I couldn’t recall his face at all, or any of the others whose names had been so carefully etched into the smooth metal surface.

‘Yes, it was,’ Felicia agreed. ‘Although they didn’t realise it at first, they just had me fetching and carrying for the magi. Then they started to appreciate that what a job like this really needs is an unconventional approach.’

‘Which you would most certainly have provided,’ I agreed dryly.

‘I did.’ Felicia nodded, producing a ration bar from a pocket of her robes, and began to chew thoughtfully; clearly her habit of snacking at odd moments had remained with her, even after all these years, another character quirk most tech-priests would have regarded as eccentric at best. ‘Of course some of the more conventionally-minded ones resisted giving me more responsibility at first, but they couldn’t argue with the results I was getting.’

‘So now you’re in charge here,’ I said.

Felicia chuckled, which surprised me; I’d forgotten how rich and good-humoured her laugh was, another trait which I had no doubt had failed to impress her superiors. ‘Omniissiah’s cogs, no. Who wants all that paperwork? I just supervise the project team.’

‘Good afternoon, miss,’ Jurgen said, apparently completely unsurprised to see her. But then I’d seldom seen him express surprise about anything.

‘Hello, Jurgen.’ Felicia wiped her hand on her robe, and proffered it in greeting. After a moment of perplexity, my aide rubbed the worst of the grime off his own, and shook it gingerly. ‘You’re looking well.’ Which had hardly been true even the first time she’d known him, but the sentiment was a kindly one, so I couldn’t really take issue with it.

‘It’s a pleasure to see you too, miss,’ Jurgen said, with every sign of sincerity, retrieving his hand as soon as he decently could.

‘Well, this is all very nice,’ Felicia said, taking in the wreckage of our car, and the scattered remnants of the servitors, with a regretful sigh, ‘but I suppose we’d better get down to the business which brought you here.’ She began to lead the way towards the shrine, fastidiously sidestepping a few fragments of mangled flesh and metal. ‘I’m sure you’re anxious to get back to your war.’

The main hall of the shrine had hardly changed at all since the last time I’d seen it, the same high, airy ceiling suspended above a scattering of metallic objects I couldn’t identify, arranged on plinths placed around the floor in some regular but complex pattern. As before, the lighting was diffuse, emanating from no obvious source, but somehow managing to impart an air of serenity and quiet contemplation. Nevertheless, I remained wary; the last time I’d set foot in here we’d stumbled across a messily-murdered tech-priest, then a malfunctioning killing machine had tried to take my head off.

‘This way,’ Felicia said, as though I might have forgotten, leading us towards the moving staircase that gave access to the control chapel on the upper level.

I glanced briefly in its direction, but the door was closed. I had no doubt that nothing had altered at all while I’d been away, though, the banks of control lecterns still flickering with arcane information as they monitored the state of the generators buried at the base of the dam, and the view of the lake and the valley beyond through the wide picture window just as spectacular as ever. That wasn’t our destination, however; as we approached the foot of the escalator, Felicia raised her hand imperiously, and a section of wall moved smoothly aside, squeaking slightly on its metal runners.

‘You mended that, then,’ Jurgen said, nodding sagely at his own statement of the obvious. The last time we’d been here, the concealed door had been blasted open by something not dissimilar to the melta he carried, and the staircase beyond had been visible to anyone who might have wandered in out of the rain.

‘We thought it best,’ Felicia said evenly, ‘given that what we’re doing here’s supposed to be a secret.’ Most men would probably have taken offence at the barely-concealed amusement in her tone, but, as ever, Jurgen remained constitutionally immune to sarcasm, and simply nodded judiciously.

I must confess to hesitating for a fraction of a second before beginning my

descent, but it was hard to forget the sight of all the wanton carnage I'd discovered in the complex buried beneath the shrine the last time I'd ventured down those stairs. On this occasion, however, all the white-robed acolytes of the Omnissiah that I passed were alive and well, if that phrase can be properly applied to anyone more machine than human, and the red uniformed skitarii seemed as alert as I might have expected. A couple of them were stationed at the bottom of the flight, their hellguns ready, and if Felicia hadn't been with us I'm sure they would have issued a challenge. As it was, they simply saluted as soon as they caught sight of her, receiving a friendly nod of the head in return, which seemed to disconcert them even more than a party of Chaotic raiders brandishing lasguns would have done.

'You seem reasonably well protected,' I admitted. I'd fought alongside the Mechanicus's private army on a number of occasions, and in most cases they'd acquitted themselves well. The most glaring exception being the disastrous expedition to Interitus Prime, which I'd tagged along on completely by accident, and which had been wiped out to a man by the necrons. That thought brought scant comfort, and for a moment all my paranoid imaginings about the chamber I thought I'd glimpsed on the asteroid came rushing to the forefront of my mind again, before the more urgent demands of the here and now pushed them firmly away. We had Varan and his horde about to descend on us, that was an incontrovertible fact, and panicking about non-existent necron tombs was hardly going to help matters.

'That's probably what the last lot thought,' Jurgen opined gloomily, and I nodded, grateful that someone else had voiced the thought before I could.

'I think you'll find we're a bit better prepared this time,' Felicia said, in a voice that was neither a threat nor a warning, but somehow managed to convey overtones of both. Clearly the Killian solution wasn't going to be an option if diplomacy failed. She paused for a moment before a wide bronze door, did something to a locking plate with the old mechadendrite which still grew from the base of her spine, and stood aside as the portal swung open. 'After you.'

'Ladies first,' I riposted; there was no telling what might be waiting inside.

Felicia laughed. 'You haven't changed a bit,' she said, more accurately than she knew, and led the way into the room beyond. After taking a couple of paces, she glanced back at me, a challenging smile on her lips. 'Come on then. As you've come all this way, you might as well see what we've

managed to put together.'

'Wait here, Jurgen,' I said quietly. For one thing, I'd feel a lot happier with him watching my back, and for another, the Shadowlight had always lost its power whenever he'd got close to it. So far as I was aware, no one here knew he was a blank, and that was a secret I was determined to keep, partly because Amberley would get seriously snitty if her most precious asset became public knowledge,⁵² and partly because if I did end up having to steal the bloody thing to keep it safe, I didn't want to blow the main advantage we had, which was that no one here knew Jurgen could handle it safely without taking all kinds of special precautions.

'Coming,' I replied, entering the chamber behind her, then stopped still, staring in wonderment. For the first time in sixty years I was close enough to the Shadowlight to have reached out and touched it, but I was so astonished by what else was in the room that I barely noticed.



FOURTEEN

‘Well?’ Felicia asked, stepping aside to afford me a better view. ‘What do you think?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I admitted cautiously, taking another step forward to stand beside her. Mindful of the nausea which had assailed me whenever I’d got too close to the Shadowlight before, not to mention the mess that was left of Killian after he’d fallen under its baleful influence, I still kept a fair amount of distance between me and it, though, you can be sure of that. To my faint surprise I still felt no ill effects, but, determined not to push my luck, advanced no further. ‘What’s that thing it’s standing on?’

‘We’re still not entirely sure,’ Felicia acknowledged cheerfully, ‘but it’s impressive, isn’t it?’

‘Impressive is hardly the word,’ I agreed, as levelly as I could. Terrifying would be closer to the mark, if you asked me. The whole thing seemed utterly unnatural, and I could practically feel the presence of the warp in the room with us, coiling about the artefact like a serpent preparing to strike.

But I’m getting ahead of myself; I suppose I should have started out by describing the thing. Without setting down the unsettling effect that the sight of it had on me first, however, it would be difficult to convey how profoundly disconcerting it was to look upon; something no mere description of its physical form could possibly hope to do.

The first thing I recognised was the Shadowlight, of course, still looking like a slab of polished stone, roughly the size of a data-slate, into which light seemed to fall like water into a sponge. This time, however, it was resting in a narrow slot cut into the top of a pedestal of shining crystal, which held it upright, more or less level with my belt buckle, surrounded by three polished spheres of some strange blue mineral which looked

uncannily like solid water, roughly the size of my fist. These all rested in circular depressions in the glowing surface of the crystal pillar; other holes, identical in size and shape, were left vacant, and I pointed them out, more to show I was paying attention than because I expected to understand what they meant. 'Looks like you've got a few more of those ball things to find before you can complete the set,' I said.

'Hm,' Felicia replied. 'We thought that too, at first, but then we realised the spheres are controls of some kind. Look.'

Before I could protest, she'd reached out with a mechadendrite, and plucked one from its resting place, depositing it in another depression close to its original position. I couldn't have said why, exactly, but my skin prickled, as though there was a static charge in the air, and for a moment I felt a faint throbbing against the inside of my temples, like the ghostly presentiment of a forthcoming headache.

'What did you do?' I asked, fighting the impulse to draw my weapons again in response to the air of untrammelled sorcery which had suddenly permeated the room.

Felicia shrugged. 'I haven't the faintest idea,' she said. 'But it's interesting, don't you think?' The soft refulgence of the crystal pillar had changed, faint bands of colour rippling in the whiteness of it, like the patterns on a large body of water at sunset. The effect was almost hypnotic, and I dragged my eyes away with an effort, feeling the baleful influence of the warp reaching out for me through the strange device. It seemed incredible that Felicia hadn't felt it too, but she seemed completely unconcerned: probably because by now she was more machine than human, and accordingly less sensitive to the presence of the abnatural.

'We know that the Shadowlight could boost psychic powers all on its own,' I said, conscious that I was prattling to try and calm my own nerves, and uncomfortably aware that the tech-priest knew me well enough to have probably noticed the fact.

'That's right, we do.' She nodded in agreement. 'So far as we've been able to determine, it collects and focuses energy directly from the empyrean, presumably for the rest of the system to make use of.'

'Which makes it dangerous enough just on its own,' I said. 'Believe me, I've seen what that lump of rock can do, and it isn't pretty.'

'I don't doubt that,' Felicia replied dryly. 'I've read the report of how you helped recover it.'⁵³

‘Then you’ll know I’ve got valid grounds for concern,’ I shot back, taking in the rest of our surroundings for the first time. The peculiar xenos device had naturally attracted the bulk of my attention, but now I became aware that the walls were covered with flat shards of stone, polished almost as smooth as the Shadowlight, but, thank the Emperor, without any sign of its more unsettling properties. Each was covered in angular scratches, which I felt vaguely repelled by, without ever quite being able to put my finger on why that might be. I walked across to examine the nearest, not because I was particularly interested, but because it gave me a reasonable excuse to put a bit of distance between myself and the Shadowlight. ‘What are these?’

‘The instruction manual, we think,’ Felicia said, staring at them with a peculiar expression I can only describe as ‘hungry’ on her face. (At least, as much of her face as was still capable of expression, of course.) ‘But it’s not been that easy to translate.’

‘I imagine not,’ I replied, remembering the comments that Mott, Amberley’s savant, had made about the enigmatic records during our pursuit of the artefact on Peririmunda. A few similar finds had been made on worlds across the entire breadth of the galaxy, I recalled vaguely, left by a civilisation which had been gone for aeons even before humanity first evolved back on the primeval plains of Holy Terra, but without any common frame of reference very little progress had been made in translating them.⁵⁴ Struck by my earlier thought, that the only surviving presence from those days which we still knew about was the necrons, I looked at the slab a little more closely, finding to my inexpressible relief no trace of the peculiar tracery of circles and lines which seems to serve those hellspawned machine creatures as some kind of script.⁵⁵

‘So you still haven’t got a clue what this thing’s for,’ I concluded, and Felicia shrugged.

‘I wouldn’t say that, exactly,’ she replied, in a manner which in most people I would have found distinctly evasive, ‘but I think you need to talk to the rest of the team before I tell you any more. The situation here’s a bit complicated.’

‘Of course it is,’ I said, sighing. For a moment I was almost nostalgic for my youthful days of dodging orks across the landscape of Perlia, which, though unpleasant enough at the time, had at least been straightforward; all I’d had to worry about then was going as fast as possible, and shooting everything green I came across along the way.

‘Well then, I suppose we’d better get to it,’ Felicia said, turning away from the infernal device at last, and leading the way towards the door. I followed as quickly as I decently could, inhaling the familiar odour of festering socks and unwashed hair almost gratefully as I gained the corridor, and the closing portal finally cut off the sight of that balefully glowing pedestal.

‘Commissar.’ Jurgen greeted me, his melta still held ready for action, to my mingled relief and amusement. Clearly, despite the unexpected appearance of an old friend, he was unwilling to discount the possibility of further trouble before we left. Quite wisely, too, in my opinion; everyone here would be well aware of what had happened the last time an inquisitor had demanded access to the Shadowlight, and would no doubt be on their guard for the slightest sign of treachery from either of us. Not that we had any intention of trying to seize the wretched thing by force, of course, particularly after seeing how bulky the assembled mechanism was now, but it’s what I’d be thinking in their position, so I could hardly blame them if they were as paranoid as I am. ‘Everything all right?’

‘Up to a point,’ I told him carefully. ‘Moving it would no longer appear to be a realistic option.’ Not now that Orelus and his ship, along with the heavy lifting servitors from the cargo holds we’d have needed to lug the wretched thing about in the first place, were well out of the system, and high-tailing it along the warp currents to wherever he was due to meet Amberley.⁵⁶

Overhearing the exchange, Felicia looked smug. ‘I’ve set up a meeting in the conference room,’ she said, although how she’d managed that while we’d been together I had no idea; presumably she had some kind of internal vox-unit which she’d been able to use during our conversation, in spite of the distraction that must have afforded. (When I asked her later, she said it was something to do with her cerebral implants, which let her think about a multitude of things at the same time; a sacrament she referred to as ‘multitasking.’)⁵⁷

‘Good,’ I replied, masking my surprise as best I could. ‘The sooner we get things sorted out here the better.’

‘Do you want me to accompany you, sir?’ Jurgen asked, and I shook my head.

‘Best to stay outside and watch the door,’ I told him tactfully. I was going to have to work hard enough to bring the people here onside as it was, and having my aide at my shoulder brandishing a melta was hardly going to

help win their confidence. ‘We won’t want to be disturbed while we’re discussing things.’

‘Quite so,’ Felicia agreed, keeping the fleshly part of her face completely deadpan.

After a few more words of little consequence she led me along a corridor I didn’t recognise (but then I hadn’t explored much of the underground complex when we first discovered it, and I was certain that it had been considerably enlarged in the eighty years or so since my last visit; something about the echoes and the circulation of the air felt different to my hiver’s instincts), eventually fetching up in front of a polished wooden door. This alone was enough to tell me that we’d crossed over into the Inquisition side of the complex, as cogboys prefer the all-metal look when it comes to matters of interior design, and I began to breathe a little more easily. I might not be about to find allies here, but at least they should be willing to listen to what I had to say.

I left Jurgen outside, accompanied by a couple of hellgun-toting skitarii (who were probably wishing they had augmetic noses by now, to go with the ocular implants they both sported), which left me in little doubt that at least the Mechanicus side of the partnership still harboured misgivings about the purity of our intentions. Felicia barely glanced at the scarlet-uniformed troopers before pushing the doors open and inviting me inside, though, so perhaps the guards were simply meant as a courtesy after all.⁵⁸

My first impression was a mixed one, of both familiarity and oddness. The basic layout of the room was conventional enough, with a long table down the centre, flanked by chairs, and a crimson carpet on the floor, into which the familiar barred I of the inquisition had been worked in grey, surrounded by the cogwheel of the Adeptus Mechanicus in white. Instead of wood, however, the table was of burnished bronze, with the interlinked sigils engraved into its upper surface, chased in gold. The only wooden furniture in the room was a small side table, containing a silver tray on which a couple of decanters and a handful of crystal goblets stood invitingly, and a lacquered cabinet, in which the mingled symbols of the two institutions had been incorporated, and which long experience of such places led me to believe was the normal resting place of the drinks. The seats around the table were of metal, but those on one side had been provided with cushions, so even if the room were empty, I would have been able to deduce quite easily that these were the ones generally used by the Inquisition delegates to

the partnership.

In fact, though, it was pretty obvious which parties habitually sat where, since most of the seats were occupied. As Felicia and I entered the chamber, a dozen faces glanced up in our direction; those on the left showing clear signs of augmetic enhancement, those on the right generally unmodified, but almost as unreadable. All but one of the Mechanicus delegation were wearing the white robes of their calling, of course, but none that I could see were as elaborately ornamented as Felicia's, so it hardly surprised me when they nodded in unison, with a respectful murmur of 'Magos,' and she took her place at the head of the table. There wasn't a chair there, but it didn't seem to bother her; another habit she seemed to have retained from the days when I'd known her rather better was to perch on the mechadendrite attached to the bottom of her spine, using it as a makeshift seat.

'You told me you weren't in charge here,' I said easily, circling the table to get to the drinks. For one thing I needed one, after all the excitement since our arrival, and for another it gave me a chance to study the other people in the room without appearing to stall for time. I wouldn't be able to tell much about most of them, of course, but if I could pick out a few individuals I could read easily, it would help me to get a feel for how well the meeting was going. Or, knowing my luck, how badly.

'I'm not,' Felicia said. 'I'm supervising the technotheological side of the enterprise, but this concilium sets matters of policy, and the Inquisition scribes take care of the paperwork.'

The tech-priests were all looking at me blankly, with about as much expression as a necron, but the single exception on that side of the table I'd noticed before, a dark-haired man in the crimson uniform of a skitarii officer, was gazing in my direction with an air of wary respect, no doubt aware of my reputation. I nodded an affable greeting, which, after a moment, he returned; that was a good sign, so I made a show of pouring myself a measure of the rather indifferent amasec the decanter had disappointingly turned out to contain (after all my years as an occasional associate of Amberley's entourage, I'd got used to the idea that Inquisition operatives tended to make the most of life's little luxuries),⁵⁹ and smiled at the assembled company in the open and friendly fashion I was so good at feigning. 'Anyone else like one while I'm up?' I asked.

No one did, so I made for one of the vacant seats on the Inquisition side of the line. I'd already as good as declared my covert allegiance to the

organisation in any case, so there was no point in dissembling further, and there was no seat on the only neutral table edge, opposite Felicia, anyhow. I took the closest empty chair to where she was sitting, partly because it was obvious that her opinion would have a great deal of influence on the assembled tech-priests, and partly because that placed me as far as possible from the young man with the glassy expression and the unruly thatch of brown hair sitting almost opposite the skitarii captain. I'd met enough psykers in my life to be wary of them, even a sanctionite, as he clearly was. Just as well I'd left Jurgen outside, I thought.

'In case you don't know,' Felicia said, with just enough seriousness for me to be sure that she was treating my presence here as a bit of a joke again, 'this is my old friend Ciaphas Cain. Hero of the Imperium, Liberator of Perlia, all that stuff you see on the statue plinths.' She cocked her head quizzically. 'And, apparently, a covert acolyte, working for Inquisitor Vail. Care to clarify that, commissar?'

'As much as I can,' I said, doing the open honest face again. I was well aware of how much the Inquisition group would enjoy their little cloak and dagger games, and how fiercely they'd jockey for position in their shadowy hierarchy, so it would be as well to hint that I knew stuff they weren't privy to. 'Though I'm not really an acolyte as such. Inquisitor Vail's a personal friend, and I've occasionally been in a position to help her out a bit, that's all.' The hard-faced man on my left nodded thoughtfully, clearly convinced that I was far deeper into the inner mysteries of the Ordo Xenos than he was. 'Knowing this, her last emissary asked me to pick up where he left off, when he was forced to leave the system during the first incursion.'

'I've read the report,' Hard-face said evenly. After a moment he stuck out a hand. 'As we seem to be skipping the introductions, I'm Terie Makan, head of project security.' He exchanged an awkward look with the skitarii officer. 'On the Inquisition side, obviously. Captain Yaitz handles things for the Mechanicus.'

'Sieur Makan.' I shook his hand, adjusting the smile a little. The look that passed between the two men had told me a good deal, mainly that they were willing to co-operate with each other, but with a certain degree of reservation on both sides. To everyone's surprise, I then nodded to Yaitz, down the length of the table. 'Captain Yaitz. I look forward to working more closely with the two of you.' Their almost identical expressions of surprise told me that this was an equally unexpected development for both

men.

‘Are we to infer from that remark that the ridiculous idea your rogue trader friend proposed has been shelved?’ one of the tech-priests asked.

I nodded. ‘Magos Tayber has been good enough to show me the assembled artefact,’ I said, Felicia’s formal title sounding slightly strange issuing from my own mouth. ‘It’s quite clear to me that there’s no realistic prospect of removing it to a safer location now, at least in the time we have available.’ A mingled air of relief and smugness began to radiate from the cogboy side of the table, and a faint tingle of alarm began to manifest over in the Inquisition section.

‘Then we need to take steps to ensure its security,’ Makan said, looking uncomfortably like a man who’s just bitten his own tongue.

‘Precisely why I’m here,’ I assured him. ‘Whatever happens, we must keep the Shadowlight out of Varan’s hands. Even if that means destroying it ourselves.’

I half expected the room to erupt at that point, but instead all I could hear was the faint hiss of indrawn breath from around the table. (Well, most of the table. I suspect some of the tech-priests were beyond such human frailties as breathing.)

‘That would be very much our last resort, of course,’ I said, after a moment, and everyone relaxed again.

‘I’m not entirely sure that we could destroy it, even if we wanted to,’ one of the tech-priests ventured after a moment. ‘It’s already survived aeons of geological upheaval, without so much as a scratch. I hardly think a conventional explosion would do it much harm.’

‘Killian seemed to think a plasma bolt might hurt it,’ I ventured hopefully.

‘Killian was an imbecile,’ Makan said, which seemed to be something everyone agreed on, Inquisition and Mechanicus alike. ‘He didn’t have the faintest conception of what he was dealing with.’

‘Lunatics seldom do,’ I pointed out evenly. ‘Which brings us back to the Chaos horde about to descend on this planet. They’re about as mad as you can get, by definition, and you can be sure Varan won’t hesitate to muck about with the thing if he manages to get his hands on it.’ I paused. ‘And even if, by some miracle, he does resist the temptation, Abaddon most certainly won’t.’

‘The Despoiler?’ The young psyker spoke for the first time, his voice faintly reedy, as though listening to some distant music in his head. ‘You

think he has a direct hand in this?’

‘Who knows?’ I shrugged, trying to seem bluff and businesslike, and mask the terror which had almost overwhelmed me at the thought of attracting the attention of the worst piece of walking malevolence to hit the galaxy since Horus’s day. ‘Varan undoubtedly answers to him, at any rate. All the warmasters do.’

‘True.’ Yaitz nodded in agreement. ‘The one advantage we still have is that they’re presumably unaware of the device’s existence.’

‘Unfortunately, that might not be the case,’ I said, provoking another windstorm of wordless consternation around the table. ‘Our best intelligence would indicate that Perlia has been deliberately targeted by Varan’s flotilla. No one in the defence force has any idea why, but I think we all know what there is here which would tempt a raiding force to cross almost the entire galaxy in an attempt to reach it.’

‘But how could they know about the Shadowlight?’ Yaitz asked, with a pointed look at Makan. ‘It’s supposed to be one of the most securely kept secrets in the segmentum.’

‘It is.’ The security man nodded briskly. ‘But secrets have an uncomfortable habit of getting out. Innumerable people have rotated through here in the last few hundred years, from both our institutions. It would only take one to let something slip, or fall into the hands of the enemy.’

‘I can assure you, no servant of the Omnissiah would ever be so indiscreet,’ Yaitz said frostily.

‘My money’s on Killian,’ I said, stepping in quickly to defuse the incipient argument. In fact I had no idea how the secret had got out, nor did I particularly care, but I’d been a commissar long enough to know that division in our own ranks would be worth an extra company of Traitor Marines to the enemy. ‘He was sponsoring a Chaos cult on Pererimunda, to recruit potential psykers for his lunatic scheme. If any of them survived the purges, they could have spread the word.’

To my relief, everyone around the table seemed to be buying it, accepting Killian as the designated scapegoat without further argument. ‘What really worries me is the prospect of Varan, or Abaddon, or anyone else for that matter, picking up where he left off. They wouldn’t hesitate to turn out wyrds in industrial quantities if they could, and Emperor alone knows how much harm that could do.’

‘It would destroy the galaxy,’ the young psyker said quietly, his voice somehow resonating all the more for its lack of volume.

‘Master Sparsen may be exaggerating,’ Makan began, ‘but...’

‘I’m not exaggerating in the least,’ the pale young man assured him. ‘The power of the warp would flow through them, untrammelled by the wards the blessing of the Emperor places in the minds of his true servants. Aside from the harm they’d do directly, many would become possessed by daemons and worse, allowing the full horrors of the empyrean to rampage unchecked among the stars. Within two generations, the Eye of Terror would grow to swallow us all.’ His voice was no louder than before, but it was the expression of absolute horror on his face that convinced me. Here was a man who gazed into the depths of the warp on a daily basis, and wouldn’t be lightly moved by what he saw there, and he was clearly convinced that he spoke no more than the literal truth.

‘Then let’s make sure it doesn’t come to that,’ Felicia said calmly, and the young psyker nodded.

‘That would be best,’ he said quietly.

‘If we can’t remove the Shadowlight, and we can’t destroy it, we’ll just have to make sure the enemy can’t get their hands on it,’ I said evenly. ‘Captain Yaitz, perhaps we could confer afterwards about our options for defending this installation. I’m sure you have some ideas in that regard.’

‘I do.’ Yaitz nodded. ‘And I’m sure your own experience of engaging the enemy here would prove invaluable in assessing them. You probably have some suggestions of your own, too.’

‘Well, I suppose we could blow up the dam again,’ I said, being careful to inflect the remark like a joke, ‘but I suspect they’ll be ready for that.’ I know I would be, if I’d heard about the earlier battle on this site, and if Varan and his confederates hadn’t already, they certainly would do almost as soon as they set foot on Perlia. Cain’s Last Stand, as the locals both flatteringly and erroneously insist on calling the engagement, is a legend on this generally rather dull little world, and has spawned innumerable books, pict dramas, holos and picturestrips, each one more exaggerated and inaccurate than the last.

‘We’ll set some demo charges anyway,’ Felicia said decisively, taking me aback rather, given how stropky she’d been the first time I’d breached the dam. It seemed that time, and greater responsibility, had grafted a stronger streak of pragmatism into her, along with all the augmetic junk. ‘If they’re

dumb enough to fall for it again, we might as well be prepared to take advantage of the fact.’ She gazed levelly at the assembled tech-priests, as if waiting for a challenge to her authority. None of them spoke, but most of them were clearly far from happy at the prospect. ‘We can always build another dam, but there’s only one Shadowlight.’

‘Thank the Emperor,’ I muttered, rather more loudly than I’d intended, and turned to Makan. ‘I’d like you to sit in on the discussion too,’ I added. ‘I’m sure you’ve done a thorough threat assessment, which ought to cover most of the likely scenarios.’

‘Everything from the orks coming back to a hrud migration,’ he assured me, ‘or a *coup d’état* by tau-backed secessionists. Lines of approach, infiltration of the staff by enemy sympathisers, you name it.’ Aware of the hard stares being directed at him from all quarters of the room, he shrugged defiantly. ‘I’m not saying anyone is a traitor, just that I’ve drawn up contingency plans for dealing with that possibility, along with anything else I could think of. It’s my job.’

‘Which we should all thank the Emperor you take as seriously as you so clearly do,’ I put in, smoothing over the awkward moment as effortlessly as my training and lifetime of experience allowed me to. ‘Does anyone else have anything to add that might be useful?’

‘Only that the completed device is far more than a psychic amplifier,’ Felicia put in. She glanced around the table, waiting for a challenge again, and relaxed almost imperceptibly when one failed to materialise. The next time she spoke it was directly to me. ‘We’re still far from understanding its true purpose, but we are beginning to form some tentative conclusions.’

‘That’s right,’ another of the tech-priests chimed in. ‘As Magos Tayber might have explained already, the Shadowlight component draws directly on the power of the warp, which appears to be why it can boost or activate latent psychic abilities.’

‘She has,’ I confirmed. ‘Go on.’

‘The rest of the device seems to be a system for focussing that energy,’ Felicia said, giving her talkative underling the sort of look I used to reserve for Gunner Ehrlsen, my most regular disciplinary problem back in the relatively carefree days I’d spent in the 12th Field Artillery. ‘What it was originally intended to achieve we’re still not entirely sure, but if we’re right, it can alter the very fabric of reality.’

‘Holy Throne!’ I said involuntarily, seeing Sparsen’s horrifying vision of

the future suddenly transformed into a relatively optimistic picture by comparison. Instead of taking the better part of a century to annihilate the galaxy, it seemed the Shadowlight could do the job in little more than an eye blink if it fell into the wrong hands. Whatever Felicia might have to say about it, or Amberley too, come to that, I determined then and there to find some way of destroying the cursed thing before it was too late. ‘Why would anyone build a monstrosity like that?’

‘Out of fear,’ another Inquisitorial delegate chimed in. She was a sharp-featured young woman in the habit of a sister of the Ordo Dialogus, presumably charged with the thankless task of making some kind of sense of the chicken scratches I’d observed on the tablets lining the walls of the chamber in which the Shadowlight now resided. ‘We know from some of the fragments recovered at other sites across the galaxy that the Ancients were at war. Who or what with we have no idea, although some scholars have speculated that the character most frequently associated with the enemy can be transliterated into Gothic as *Katarn* or *C’tan*.’

‘Never heard of them,’ I said, with some relief: at least it wasn’t the damned necrons.

‘Both sides appear to have been wiped out in the war,’ the sister said. ‘Complete mutual annihilation. Only the occasional relic of the Ancients survives, and nothing at all of the *C’tan*.⁶⁰ But there are legends among the eldar which might possibly have their roots in that conflict. Of course the pointy-eared limpwrists are too far up their own fundamentals to share any useful knowledge with us lesser breeds, but we have managed to find a few bits of information which might be relevant through some rather unorthodox channels.’

Meaning Inquisition assets, presumably. It wasn’t entirely unknown for individual eldar to co-operate with members of the Ordo Xenos on very rare occasions: Amberley spoke their tongue tolerably well, and I recalled her mentioning that she’d learned it on one such enterprise, the details of which she never confided in me,⁶¹ so I assumed that the forthright sister had been able to make use of some similar line of contact. She’d probably get on well with Julien, I thought fleetingly, before returning my mind to more pressing concerns.

‘Information about the Shadowlight?’ I hazarded, more to give the impression that I was still on top of things than because I expected to be able to understand the answer.

‘Possibly,’ the sharp-featured sister said. ‘According to some rather obscure passages in the *Lay of Kelce*, the Ancients may have attempted to tap into the power of the warp directly in an attempt to defend themselves against their enemies. Some eldar scholars even believe that it was this which first unleashed the curse of Chaos on the galaxy.’

‘A far-fetched piece of speculation, which Sister Rosetta seems to take considerably more seriously than it warrants,’ Felicia said firmly, receiving a most unbeatific glare in return.

‘Given how old and powerful the artefact undoubtedly is, it would be unwise in the extreme to ignore the possibility, that’s all I’m saying,’ Rosetta said, with the air of someone who said it quite often.

As I considered the full import of her words, I felt my bowels turn to water, and had to muster all my willpower not to let my consternation show on my face. Just when I’d been thinking the situation couldn’t possibly get any worse, too. ‘It seems to me that whether it’s true or not, you should be proceeding with the utmost caution,’ I said carefully.

‘Don’t worry, we are,’ Felicia assured me breezily, which signally failed to make me feel any better. I knew her headstrong streak of old, and had little doubt that if all seemed lost, she’d take a chance on activating the thing just to see what happened. Worse still, Emperor help me, I’d probably let her, if there seemed to be the slightest chance that it might work.

Well, that was a problem for another day. Right now, as Felicia had pointed out back on the piazza, so soon after our arrival, Jurgen and I had a war to get back to.

I nodded thoughtfully. ‘It seems to me, then, that we’d best leave you to your researches.’ After all, they hadn’t managed to blow up the galaxy so far, despite decades of doing their best, and if there was even the remotest chance that Felicia and her people could find a way of using the device reasonably safely against our enemies, we might still be desperate enough to try it once the invasion started. Even if there wasn’t, it would keep them occupied, and out from under my feet. I glanced at Makan and Yaitz as I rose. ‘I presume there’s somewhere we can thrash out our defensive strategies without bothering everyone else, gentlemen?’ And get Jurgen out of the corridor before Sparsen encountered him, more to the point.

‘My office is nearest,’ Makan said, clearly prepared for an objection from his opposite number, but Yaitz simply nodded his agreement.

‘It would save a little time,’ he conceded, evidently prepared to co-operate

to the best of his ability.

‘Good,’ I said, in my best Cain the Hero manner. ‘Then let’s get to it.’ I nodded at Felicia. ‘No doubt I’ll see you again before we leave.’

‘You will if you don’t want to walk back to Chilinvale,’ she agreed cheerfully. ‘That car of yours looks as though it’s going to be difficult to start.’

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Editorial Note:

Evidently Cain, or, more likely, Jorgen, did manage to find some form of transport, because by the time his narrative resumes his ostensible tour of inspection has concluded. Typically, he is as vague as ever about the passage of time, but from other references in the text we can infer that roughly three days have passed in the interim.

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FIFTEEN

‘Let me get this straight,’ Visiter said, with an air of vague bafflement. We were standing on the schola’s shuttle pad, our voices sufficiently muffled by the roar of the Aquila’s engines as Sprie powered them up in preparation for take-off to render the conversation as proof against eavesdropping as I felt able to contrive, which was why I’d gone to see the Commodore off in the first place. At our last strategy meeting he’d argued quite forcefully that there was no point in him attempting to co-ordinate a war in space from down here on the ground, and, accordingly, was preparing to take up residence aboard one of the SDF gunboats, which had put in for supplies just in time to find itself unexpectedly promoted to the flagship of Visiter’s makeshift space fleet. ‘You’re plannin’ to evacuate the schola to some Mechanicus shrine in the middle of nowhere?’

‘I’m hoping it won’t come to that,’ I told him, truthfully enough. ‘But if we do have to cut and run, there won’t be a lot of choice about where to go. It’s remote enough for the enemy to have trouble catching up, and it’s ground I’ve fought over before, which gives us as much of an advantage as we’re likely to get.’ I could hardly tell him the real reason I wanted to concentrate as many of our forces in the Valley of Daemons as I could was to defend a secret Inquisition facility, so had decided that this was a reasonable excuse for making it our fallback position. Certainly the battle plan I’d managed to cook up with Yaitz and Makan’s help made it seem readily defensible, which went some way towards casting a sheen of verisimilitude over our necessary deception.

‘Fair point,’ Visiter conceded. He put down the kitbag that, up until that point, he’d been carrying over his shoulder, and rummaged inside it for a data-slate. ‘I’ve managed to put an evacuation plan together in case you do

have to pull out.’ He kicked a couple of files across to my own slate, which I resolved to peruse at the earliest opportunity, and glanced at the Aquila’s cockpit, behind the armourcrys windshield of which the redheaded naval cadet could be discerned, still working methodically through his pre-flight checks. ‘Good luck to you all.’

‘And to you,’ I replied sincerely. Preparing to go into battle inside a thin shell of metal surrounded by an almost infinite amount of nothing at all has always struck me as a really bad idea, but it was obvious from his body language that Visiter couldn’t wait to get back aboard a ship, even one as fragile and undergunned as a system defence boat; but then I suppose he’d got used to shipboard life during his long and illustrious career with the Navy, and settling down on a planet somewhere had given him itchy feet.⁶² ‘The Emperor protects.’ I trotted out the tired old formula by rote, without even thinking, then found myself hoping that in this particular instance it would turn out to be true.

Visiter saluted, shouldered his ditty bag⁶³ again, and walked up the ramp as I returned the gesture. Once he was inside and out of sight I turned away, retreating to a safe distance while the Aquila lifted, and watched it rise until it was little more than a fast-moving dot against the clear mountain sky.

‘One down,’ I told myself, and went to look for Rorkins. The schola had become even more infused with militant purposefulness than usual in my absence, and if it hadn’t been for the youthfulness of most of the faces I passed, I might almost have been back on an Imperial Guard post somewhere. Even the youngest residents were preparing as best they could, learning to fold bandages and recharge ammo packs, although several of them seemed distinctly disappointed that they wouldn’t be allowed to carry guns; desperate as we were, we hadn’t quite reached the stage where arming five-year-olds seemed like a particularly good idea.

‘Commissar.’ Maklin was approaching me, a data-slate in his hand, and an air of eager expectation hovering about him. ‘I’ve got the tactical updates you asked for.’

‘Good.’ I took the slate without looking at it, as there would be time to wade through the details later, and gestured for the cadet to walk with me. ‘What’s the bottom line?’ I took it for granted that he’d have skimmed through the files before bringing them to me, in the expectation that I’d ask for a summary, and I wasn’t disappointed; like all of them, he was learning fast.

‘Our state of readiness has improved,’ he said cautiously, with the air of someone refraining from adding ‘but...’

I nodded, and did it for him. ‘But that’s not saying a lot,’ I said.

‘I’m afraid so,’ Maklin agreed. ‘Most of the PDF are as prepared as they’re ever going to be in the time we’ve got, but the vast majority are still undertrained and underequipped. And they look like storm-troopers compared to the militia.’

‘I don’t doubt that,’ I said, then sensing that his mood had darkened, I clapped him on the back. ‘Luckily they’ve got us to keep them up to the mark. You’ll have more than earned your sash by the time this is over, I’m sure.’ For a moment I thought the faintly goofy grin on his face meant that I’d successfully boosted his morale, then I followed the direction of his gaze.

‘Cain. Seen the commodore off yet?’ Sister Julien asked. She was in full powered armour again, leading a group of her most senior novices in the battered practice sets towards the firing range. The contrast between the scarred and pitted ceramite, on which votive icons were still visible, despite decades of being bashed about, and the fresh complexions of the teenage girls wearing them was marked, and rather poignant; I found myself thinking they should have been worrying about acne and scrumball at that age, not how to field strip a bolter and the best way of disembowelling a heretic with their sarissas.

‘Just now,’ I said, glancing up at the faint contrail marking the shuttle’s passage towards orbit.

‘Well, good luck to him,’ Julien said, making the sign of the aquila.

‘He’s going to need every bit of it,’ I agreed. I’d had Kayla analysing the intelligence Orelus had supplied about the size and disposition of the enemy fleet, which had proven to be every bit as vague as he’d intimated, but which was at least better than nothing, and even her most optimistic estimate of the forces now ranged against us was far larger than anything Visiter might be able to bring to battle. We’d just have to hope that the hit and run tactics he’d advocated would turn out to be effective. ‘I see you haven’t been idle while I’ve been away either.’

‘We’ve done our best,’ Julien said. ‘The schola was designed to be defensible, of course, but not against a full-scale planetary assault.’ To Maklin’s evident delight she fell in at my shoulder, continuing to talk on the move, and her gaggle of charges followed, with a clattering of armoured

boots and a whining of servos that echoed from the walls surrounding us.

‘Visiter’s given us an exit strategy,’ I said, ‘in case we need it.’ No point yet in saying that I thought we would, as filling the Valley of Daemons with troops too early would be tantamount to holding up a sign saying ‘It’s Over Here!’ when the enemy arrived.

‘Good.’ Julien nodded, and bounded over a sandbagged autocannon emplacement, which had narrowed the entrance to one of the inner courtyards to a choke point, landing with a clatter like someone dropping a plateful of rivets. Probably never having seen an expert in power armour using the enhanced strength and agility it gave them, and certainly not with such casual ease, Maklin’s jaw dropped, though not nearly as much as those of the arbites cadets manning the thing, as the Celestian soared over their heads. To my relief, and evidently that of the arbitrators manqué, her charges declined to follow, filing through the gap in good order. ‘We can hold out here indefinitely against civil disorder or an unruly mob, but a determined assault by disciplined troops would be another matter entirely.’

‘Quite so,’ I said, as we reached the archway on the far side of the quadrangle. Our paths diverged here, but she hesitated, clearly intent on prolonging the conversation.

‘Monyka,’ Julien called.

One of the novitiates, her face lightly dusted with freckles, broke off from a conversation with Maklin, and glanced in the sister’s direction, manifestly unsure of whether her drifting attention merited a rebuke. ‘You’re in charge. Twice round the assault course, then on to the firing range. I’ll join you in a moment.’

‘Yes, sister.’ Clearly unable to believe her luck in being presented with a chance to show off in front of Maklin, Monyka beckoned the rest of the group forward. With a chorus of shrieks and yells, which wouldn’t have disgraced an ork mob, though in a much higher register, the whole pack of them bounded away towards the butts.

‘Well, I don’t know how the enemy will react to a charge like that,’ I said eventually, ‘but they terrify me.’

‘Me too,’ Julien said, but the bantering tone in her voice sounded a lot more forced than mine did. (Then again, I’d had a lot more practice at pretending to an ease I didn’t feel.) She glanced around, making sure we wouldn’t be overheard. ‘But I hope you’ve got a good fallback position in mind. If the raiders you faced in Havendown are typical of what’s going to

be thrown at us, we can't hold this place for long.'

'That's the big question,' I agreed. 'They were clearly recent converts to the enemy cause, but I'm still not sure if they were assigned to the attack because they hadn't had time to degenerate into the sort of mindless horde we usually face, or because they were considered more expendable than the long-serving acolytes.'

'Probably both,' Julien said sourly. 'They were obviously as deranged as the rest of them in any case.'

'Quite so,' I agreed. 'I'll check with Nelys, see if the interrogations of the survivors have yielded anything useful yet.' Not that I expected it to, but even the slimmest piece of information might give us an edge at this stage. After making our farewells to one another, Julien went off to round up her shrieking charges, and Maklin and I resumed our progress towards the main classrooms, which had been requisitioned by Rorkins as a command centre, much to the displeasure of the non-military teaching staff.

'Ah, commissar.' As we skirted the main Administratum block, Brasker popped out of a shadowed doorway, with an abruptness which reminded me uncomfortably of the genestealers we'd encountered aboard the mining station (though of course he didn't rip anybody's head off.) 'I wonder if I might have a quick word? Your budget sheet for the sowingtide semester is considerably overdue, and you're somewhat elusive these days to say the least.'

'I'm sorry, bursar,' I said, injecting what I thought was the right amount of irritation into my voice for Maklin's benefit, 'but I've been rather busy with defending the planet.' Then I hesitated, apparently on the verge of pushing past him. 'Oh, very well, let's sort it out now by all means. I'm sure the enemy will delay their assault while I fill out a few forms.'

'That might be the best course of action,' Brasker agreed, apparently as impervious to sarcasm as Jurgen, and stood aside to admit me. 'If we are to undergo a period of upheaval in the near future, it would be as well to make sure the files are all in order beforehand. Perhaps we could discuss it in my office, rather than conducting our business out here; I'm sure you'd feel more comfortable.' If I still harboured any doubts that his real reason for accosting me was in connection with the delicate commission I'd entrusted him with, they evaporated at that point.

I turned to the cadet accompanying me. 'This may take a few minutes,' I said. 'Could you go and find Col... Commander Rorkins, and let him know

I'd like a quick word whenever it's convenient?' Of course I could just barge in on the former storm-trooper at any time I liked, but I preferred to observe the proprieties, and it got Maklin out of the way. He went trotting off happily enough, no doubt grateful for the chance to moon over Monyka for a few uninterrupted minutes, and I followed Brasker into his den.

Like his living quarters, they were surprisingly tidy, and I made myself comfortable in the visitor's chair in front of his desk while I looked around, vaguely surprised that in all my years attached to this institution I'd never set foot in here before. The walls were lined with bookshelves, of course, and racks of data-slates, but the personal cogitator on his desk was well-used, and there was no sign of the fusty ledgers I'd expected to see scattered about. I looked more closely at his desk, and found my innate sense of paranoia nudging me again.

'Something wrong, commissar?' Brasker asked blandly.

I shook my head, and checked the impulse to let my hands move towards my weapons. 'Not really,' I said, as lightly as I could. 'I was just wondering where the ink pot was.'

'Ink pot?' For a moment Brasker looked confused, then smiled, with the first genuine warmth I could recall having seen on his face. 'Oh, you mean these.' He gestured to the flecks of ink staining his robe, as always. 'Purely for effect, I'm afraid. It's what people expect.' He sighed. 'The Administratum is a very conservative body, and in order to prosper there, it's sometimes wise to conform to other people's expectations; or at least give the impression of doing so. I'm sure you find the same thing in your profession.'

'From time to time,' I admitted, surprised to have found something of a kindred spirit in a realm so very far removed from my own. 'I take it that this display of conformity has borne fruit?'

'To some extent. It certainly helped with the commission you asked me to undertake.' The bursar selected a data-slate from the pile in front of him, and pushed it across the desk towards me. 'The results are all there, although what possible use this information might be to you is quite frankly beyond me.' He coughed, discreetly. 'It goes without saying that it's the only copy.'

'Thank you.' I activated the tiny screen, and paged through it. As I'd feared, there were a lot of files to wade through, and I certainly couldn't palm this job off on any of my cadets. At best they'd think I'd gone off the

deep end, and at worst they might begin to ask awkward questions, and start digging around for themselves. ‘Might I trouble you for a quick verbal summary?’

‘Of course.’ Brasker nodded, leaned back in his chair, and steepled his fingers, reminding me for a moment of Mott about to get started on some concatenation of conjecture. ‘In short, you appear to be right. All the places the enemy landed troops have legends associated with them, generally concerning malevolent abnatural entities.’

‘Like the sand devils,’ I said, and Brasker nodded.

‘Like the sand devils, the woodhaunts, the metal men, the...’

‘Metal men?’ I echoed, feeling as though I’d just stepped into a Valhallan shower. (Which is not an experience I’d recommend to the unwary.)

‘It’s an old story, dating back to the first colonisation,’ Brasker said, clearly surprised by the strength of my reaction. ‘The legend goes that one of the explorer teams came across some ruins in the wilderness, round about here.’ He took the slate for a moment, and brought up a map, before handing it back to me. Sure enough, it matched one of the enemy landing sites, though not either of the ones where the Chaos troopers had unaccountably vanished; I wasn’t entirely sure if that was a good sign or not.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

Brasker shrugged. ‘No one really knows, or even if there was ever a basis of truth to the story. The most common version has it that the explorators found a cache of archeotech in the ruins, and somehow managed to activate something they found in it. A short while later they voxed the landing site at what’s now Havendown, reporting that they were under attack by metal men, and that’s the last anyone saw or heard of them, the ruins, or the golems.’

‘It would be,’ I said without thinking, then, reflecting that Brasker was far from being the fool I’d taken him for for so long, added ‘that’s how these campfire stories usually end.’ I asked a few more questions, rounding out my picture of the enemy operation, and parted from the Bursar on terms so cordial that I quite surprised myself.

As I regained the fresh air and sunlight of the quadrangle, however, any lingering pleasure I might have been able to take in the balmy spring weather had completely evaporated, driven away by a cold knot of dread in the pit of my stomach. Brasker’s researches had confirmed my worst

imaginings; at the very least, it seemed, necrons had been active on Perlia as recently as ten thousand years ago, give or take a few centuries, and all my suspicions about the chamber the miners had apparently breached on the asteroid came flooding back. It was also too much of a coincidence for my liking that the metal marauders had apparently popped up at what, if my suspicions about the true objectives of Varan's raiders were correct, had probably been the site of some Ancient artefacts. If they really were the Ancients after all, or the mysterious *Katarns* Sister Rosetta had talked about, a Chaos war fleet might still turn out to be the least of our worries.

In the meantime, though, that remained the most immediate threat, so I took a deep breath, quieted my fears as best I could, and went to see Rorkins.

'It seems defensible enough,' Rorkins conceded, after glancing over the battle plan I'd presented him with. 'And, as you say, you do know the terrain there, which will be an advantage.' To my relief, he'd accepted the Valley of Daemons as a viable fallback position without argument, so readily, in fact, that I found myself wondering if he knew about the installation there already. After all, if he'd been in the Inquisition's private army, as I suspected, he must have served at a number of such hidden facilities over the years, perhaps even that one. 'Are you sure you can get us there?' Like Julien, he was under no illusions about our ability to hold the schola against a determined assault by an enemy who knew what they were doing.

'Visiter's plan seems feasible,' I told him. 'Though I wouldn't want to be the pilot who has to carry it out.'

'What about the alternative?' Rorkins asked. The commodore had thoughtfully provided a backup plan, in case the planned extraction fell through, but it looked a lot riskier to me. I'd spent a fair chunk of the morning going through the files he'd sent to my slate, and, true to my nature, anticipating everything which could go wrong, and my best chances of getting out in one piece if it did.

'Fine in theory,' I said, unable to keep a faint tone of scepticism from my voice. 'If the roads are still open, and if Rytepat hasn't been taken by the enemy, or flattened by orbital bombardment.' The thought of getting everyone mounted up on vehicles and down to the aerodrome in good order, undoubtedly fighting our way through an invading army to get there, was a

sobering one, and I found myself fervently hoping that the main plan would work.

‘And when we get there?’ Rorkins asked.

I shrugged. ‘We fight. We’ll have no choice.’ Even less of one than Rorkins knew; if the enemy got their hands on the Shadowlight, the only consolation that I could see was that I’d be comfortably dead before the warp swallowed everything.

‘Cain’s Last Stand all over again, eh?’ Rorkins said, with a hint of smile, although his voice was devoid of any real humour. Well, that was fair enough, I didn’t feel much like laughing either. ‘You’re unusually privileged. Most people only get one.’

‘I’m not most people,’ I told him, accurately enough, and stood. ‘If you’ll excuse me, Commander, I have a few more matters to attend to before things get a little noisy around here.’

‘By all means,’ Rorkins said, already reaching for one of the data-slates cluttering his desk.

I found Nelys in the buttery, apparently trying to stuff an entire salt grox bun into his mouth in one go, a cooling mug of recaf on the table next to him, and his head bent over a data-slate. Donal was with him, regarding the spectacle with his habitual expression of sardonic amusement, and nursing a mug of his own.

‘You won’t get that finished any faster if you choke,’ he admonished, then looked up and saw me. ‘Commissar.’

Nelys shot to his feet in a shower of crumbs, and snapped me a salute, his jaw still working frantically, while Donal slouched a little more slowly to attention.

‘At ease, for the love of the Emperor,’ I told them, slipping into a vacant seat. ‘We can’t afford any casualties at this stage.’

‘That’s what I’ve been telling him,’ Donal said, sipping his recaf with an air of amusement. ‘Twenty-third principle,⁶⁴ right?’

‘Quite so,’ I said dryly. ‘Perhaps you wouldn’t mind whetting my edge with one of those buns and a recaf? It’s been a long morning.’

‘Of course.’ Donal stood, and glanced at Nelys. ‘Want a refill while I’m up? Don’t want to get too much blood in your recaf stream.’

‘I’m fine,’ Nelys said, managing to reduce the plug of bread and meat in his mouth to a manageable size at last, and with a faintly dubious shake of

the head, Donal ambled off to get my snack.

‘You don’t look it,’ I told Nelys. ‘When did you last get some sleep? Or a proper meal?’

‘Yesterday, I think.’ The cadet frowned thoughtfully. ‘But I have been eating.’

‘I know.’ I nodded. ‘I was the same in my younger days. Practically lived on stuff like this.’ I accepted the mug and plate Donal put down in front of me with a nod. It was true, too, up to a point, but my attention had been rather more focussed on tarot games and feminine company than military matters, and I’d never been too busy for a good meal if there was one to be had. The salient point, though, was that Nelys now felt that I identified with him, and would be more inclined to listen to my advice. Of course I could simply have ordered him to rest, and he would have complied without question, but he needed to develop a bit of common sense about these things for himself. I quirked just enough of a self-deprecating smile for the cadets to pick up. ‘It’s a miracle I survived, really.’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but there’s just so much of this material to go through,’ Nelys said. ‘I know it’s urgent, but every time I start to get on top of it, the interrogators pass on another bundle of statements.’

‘Then get Stebbins and Garvie to help,’ I said. ‘They’re almost done chasing up the supply of weapons to the militia. And after you’ve dumped the files on them, I suggest you get a proper meal and some sleep. Too much of this stuff will keep you going,’ and I took a swallow of my recaf for emphasis, ‘but it’ll give you a blinding headache when it wears off.’

‘It’s keeping him going all right,’ Donal said. ‘He’s practically worn a groove between here and the latrines.’

‘On the other hand,’ I said, switching my attention to him, ‘you can also place too much emphasis on grabbing some downtime. Haven’t you got someone to happen to?’

‘Routine background checks,’ Donal confirmed, draining his mug and standing again. One thing I can say for him is that he could always take a hint, even if he chose not to act on it. ‘I’m sure you’ll be relieved to know that Deacon Cathcart doesn’t seem to have been sacrificing any of the progeni to the Ruinous Powers in the last semester or two. Or if he has, he’s been very discreet about it.’

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ I said dryly, waiting for him to move out of earshot before returning my attention to Nelys. Emperor knew, he needed his leg

pulled as much as anyone I ever met, but right now I needed him as focussed as he could be through a fog of exhaustion and caffeine abuse. 'Forget about writing up a formal report, at least for now. Is there anything new or unusual in the latest batch of transcripts?'

'There's one thing I think might be important.' Nelys suppressed a yawn. 'I just came across it a minute ago, and I was going to come and tell you as soon as I finished eating. Most of the prisoners are still blathering on about Varan, and not a lot else, but one of the survivors was a civilian, and he's been a bit more co-operative.'

'Has he?' I reached out for the slate, and glanced at the screen. 'One of the shuttle pilots? Why wasn't he interrogated first?'

'Because the idiots at Rytepat thought they ought to process the troopers,' Nelys said, 'in case Varan had been kind enough to give any of them a copy of his battle plan.' It was probably just the fatigue, or too much recaf, but the burst of sarcasm made him seem a lot more likable than usual. Perhaps there was more to him than a clockwork soldier after all.

'My fault,' I assured him. 'They're PDF, don't forget. I should have had someone breathing down their necks full time.' Then, in case he inferred any criticism of his own performance, I added 'You've done remarkably well keeping them as focussed as you have.'

'Thank you, sir.' He looked a little nonplussed at the compliment, and sought refuge in the minutiae of the report. 'Anyhow, they got round to this fellow eventually. He claims to be a shuttle pilot aboard the merchantman *Meggie Moon*, which was boarded by hostile forces shortly after putting in to Madasa and requisitioned as a troopship. He's got no idea who this Varan is, other than the leader of the enemy, what their plans are, or the composition of the raider fleet. All he claims to know for sure is that he was forced to fly one of the assault teams to the surface at gunpoint, and seems genuinely pleased to be back in Imperial hands.' Well, that probably wouldn't last; he'd been exposed to the forces of Chaos, even if he hadn't joined them, so he wouldn't exactly be welcomed back with open arms. Nelys paged down a few paragraphs. 'This is the really interesting bit, though.'

I craned my neck to see, and for the second time that day felt my blood freeze. 'A psyker? Is he sure?'

'He seems to be,' Nelys said. 'He says he met a sanctionite who was travelling as a passenger some years ago, and recognised the signs.'

‘But why would a psyker have given him the landing co-ordinates?’ I wondered aloud, before recalling my earlier speculation as to how the enemy had managed to pinpoint what were now clearly sites associated with the Ancients. They must still retain some residual connection to the warp, which a wyrd with the right talent would be able to recognise, and which no doubt accounted for their evil reputations even to this day. The real question was whether this mysterious psyker would be able to pinpoint the Valley of Daemons, and the galaxy-shaking secret it concealed. ‘What happened to the witch?’

‘Dead, presumably,’ Nelys said. ‘The ships burned almost as soon as the shuttles were launched, don’t forget.’

I nodded. In my experience it was never safe to presume anything where psykers were concerned, but we had no evidence to the contrary, at least for the moment. ‘Thank you, Nelys,’ I said. ‘You’ve given me a great deal to think about.’

Which I continued to do, while my recaf and bun went cold beside me. In fact, I was still sitting there when the invasion began.



Editorial Note:

Despite Cain's propensity to exaggerate on occasion for dramatic effect, this appears from his following remarks to be no more than the literal truth. However, the invasion of an entire stellar system, even a lightly defended and underprepared one, which the enemy almost certainly expected to find, is no simple matter, and the time taken by the preliminary engagements in space gave the defenders on the ground rather more warning than Cain intimates.

The following extract sets out the basics of this preliminary phase with reasonable succinctness.

From Just Visitin': The Life of a Naval Hero by Nelson Lawford, 087. M42.

The spirited defence of Perlia during the second siege was to prove that the redoubtable Commodore had lost none of his tactical skill, despite his enforced retirement. As he'd expected, the first wave of enemy vessels emerged from the warp within almost suicidal proximity to the mass of the planet itself, no doubt intending to repeat the tactic which had almost proven so successful during the first incursion: and which, indeed, would have done so, had it not been for the fortuitous presence of the *Lucre Foedas* in orbit when they emerged. Aware that the trading vessel had been forced to flee, the invaders could have anticipated little resistance, and would have had no fear of sharing the fate of their compatriots. Opinion is still divided as to whether they had taken effective precautions against the ground-based fighters which had accounted for the transport vessels in the earlier attack, since, if they had, they never got the chance to deploy them.

Visiter was to confess later that, given the size of the Perlia system and the limited number of resources at his disposal, the mining of the most likely emergence points had been more a matter of best guess than judgement, but luck or the Emperor had smiled on him in that regard; the first wave left the warp precisely where his decades of experience had led him to believe, only to find themselves coasting inexorably into the heart of the minefields the SDF had been frantically laying since the day he took command.

Although it would be some exaggeration to claim that the entire fleet was wiped out, the number of vessels crippled or destroyed outright was gratifyingly high, and the few survivors easy meat for the fighter wings launched to intercept them. Although almost a hundred assault shuttles did eventually survive to desecrate the sacred soil of Perlia, for the most part their landings were uncontrolled, and the PDF and their civilian counterparts in the PDV were quick to respond, inflicting heavy casualties on the heretics.

The second wave, however, had emerged further out, and despite continual harassment from the system defence boats and a few hastily-armed freighters, fared rather better.

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SIXTEEN

The first intimation I had of the storm about to engulf us all was a wave of agitation among the progeni at a few of the other tables, followed shortly thereafter by a familiar odour which jerked me from my reverie.

‘Jurgen,’ I said, turning to look at him, already aware that something must have gone terribly wrong; I could think of no other reason why he’d be carrying the melta again, instead of leaving it behind in his quarters. ‘I take it things aren’t going too well.’

‘No, sir, they’re not,’ he confirmed. ‘Heretic vessels are popping out of the warp all over the system.’ This was something of an exaggeration, as things turned out, but not as much of one as I would have liked.

I stood, my cold recaf and uneaten bun forgotten (but not wasted; as I turned, I was sure I saw the sandwich vanish into one of Jurgen’s tangle of pouches, and made a mental note not to accept the offer of refreshment during the next few days unless I was desperate.) ‘Come on,’ I said, ‘we need to see Rorkins.’

Inevitably the rumour was already sweeping the schola, cadets running to man their positions, and the progeni as yet too young to have been directed into any of the service branches milling around uncertainly, or being swept up by their tutors to keep them out of the way. I was pleased to note, though, that no one seemed to be panicking, at least not yet. In fact some of them, particularly the younger ones, seemed more excited than apprehensive, positively eager to get stuck into the fray. Well, they might as well enjoy themselves while they could; the brutal reality of combat would be impressing itself upon them before too much longer.

I found Rorkins and Julien in the makeshift command centre, which I must admit I found reassuringly familiar, despite the callowness of most of the

staffers running errands and manning the vox and auspex lecterns. I'd spent so much time in the improvised headquarters of Imperial Guard regiments deployed on whichever world had most recently been swept up in the ceaseless current of conflict which swirled about the Imperium that the more permanent facilities I'd seen at Rytepat had seemed more like a recruiting tableau than a functioning installation. The air of disorder here, by contrast, seemed purposeful and directed, paradoxical as that may seem to anyone without personal experience of military matters.

'What's going on?' I asked, and Rorkins glanced up at me from the screen of an auspex, his face grave.

'Please pass my congratulations to the young lady you assigned to do the threat assessment,' he said. 'Her worst case scenario was right on the money.'

'Not good, then,' I said, masking the horror I felt as best I could. I'd seen Kayla's figures for myself, and the worst case she'd put forward was very bad indeed. Enough invasion barges to swamp our defenders, even if the militia reinforcements turned out to be effective, which, after my inspection tour, I was under no illusion would turn out to be the case, backed up by a squadron of warships, many in the cruiser class, if not heavier.

'Luckily the Commadore got away in time,' Julien put in, the servos of her power armour whining slightly as she gestured me over to the hololith looted from the Administratum offices; every time she moved, it sounded as though she was surrounded by a swarm of insects. I gazed into it, trying to make sense of the inchoate cloud of contact icons swirling around Perlia. 'He seems to have given the first wave a bloody nose at any rate.'

'What happened?' I asked, having been a bit too busy over the last few days to have taken much notice of whatever else might be going on.

The Celestian chuckled. 'They tried the same trick of emerging inside our defensive perimeter that let them get a few shuttles down before, except there were dozens of carriers this time, and Visiter had mined the approaches. Even the ones that didn't take a hit got pasted by the debris. Our fighters are mopping up the ones still kicking.'

I began to understand why so many of the contacts were moving erratically, or apparently drifting, inert in space.

'Bloody PDF,' Rorkins said, grabbing a vox mic from an awestruck youth in the uniform of a storm-trooper cadet. 'They never learn. Taupe leader, break off and pursue the shuttles!'

‘Yes, sir,’ an incongruously cheerful voice assured him. The pilot, whoever he was, must have left his vox-channel open for a moment as he switched to his squadron command net, as we heard him relaying the order with a breezy enthusiasm that chilled my blood. ‘Right, you all heard that. Tally ho!’

‘Emperor give me strength,’ Rorkins said, with every sign of sincerity, and I looked at the hololith with renewed attention. ‘How could they fall for the same trick twice?’

‘Flyboys get over-excited in a target rich environment,’ I told him, having once shared a glass of amasec and some cathartic grumbling about the people under our jurisdiction with one of my counterparts from the Navy.⁶⁵

‘Not much of an excuse if they let those shuttles through,’ Rorkins said, reining in his temper with an effort. He turned to the auspex operators. ‘As soon as you’ve got a reasonable estimate of their landing zones, alert the nearest garrisons. We might not be able to stop them all from getting down, but we should be able to bottle them in once they hit.’

‘Very good, sir,’ the nearest cadet responded. In truth, there wouldn’t have been a heretic’s chance in hell of the fighters stopping all of the shuttles from getting through, even if they’d set out to intercept them in the first place, so the fighter jocks’ enthusiasm probably wouldn’t cost us all that dear in the long run. I tried to picture how many more would have been descending on us now if it hadn’t been for Visiter’s gambit with the mines, and shuddered at the image that evoked; we’d have been swamped, the planet taken within hours, and that would have been the end of everything. As it was, it seemed, thanks to the commodore’s tactical acumen, we had a fighting chance after all, at least until the second wave arrived.

‘We seem to have accounted for most of their transports, anyway,’ I said, trying to make sense of the blizzard of icons. As I’ve mentioned before, unravelling the intricacies of space combat has never really been my forte.

Rorkins nodded. ‘It looks that way,’ he said, enlarging the corner of the display where the second wave had emerged, much further out. ‘These are warships, for the most part. One or two merchantmen accompanying them, though. Emperor knows what they’ll be carrying.’

‘Their elites,’ I said. ‘The first wave will have been their expendable troops, like last time, intended to soften us up and take the ground where they can. The ones kept back will be the real warriors, waiting for their chance to seize...’ I corrected myself just in time, ‘whatever objectives are

continuing to resist.'

'That's how I read it,' Rorkins agreed.

'By elites,' Julien said, 'you mean the Traitor Legions?' Only a man as skilled as I am at reading the subtle cues by which we all betray our feelings would have noticed the faint overtone of repugnance and unease that entered her voice at that point.

'It's possible,' I said, quailing inwardly at the thought myself. I'd faced the tainted parodies of the Emperor's own Astartes on a number of occasions, emerging in one piece each time more by luck than judgement. 'But if there are any among Varan's retinue they'll be few and far between.' I hoped. In my experience, only a few advisors would be attached to a raiding fleet like this, the main bulk of the Chaos Space Marines preferring to fight their own battles under their own commands: against one another if there were no other foes available. I smiled, reassuringly. 'And they're tough, no doubt about that, but they can be beaten; I've done it before.'

'Any foe can be beaten if the Emperor stands at your back,' Julien said, sounding more like most of the other battle-sisters I'd ever met than she usually did, but mainly for her own benefit, I suspected.

'Quite so,' Rorkins said, still staring at the blips in the hololith as if he could somehow reach into it, haul Varan out of his flagship by the scruff of the neck, and finish him off here and now. He glanced across to me. 'I think you're right, this is his personal entourage. Household troops, if you will. Throne alone knows what that'll mean in practice.'

'Nothing good,' I said, from long and bitter experience.

For the next few hours the three of us watched the reports trickling in, trying to gain a picture of the overall disposition of the enemy, now that the first few shuttles were grounding, and disgorging their cargoes of fanatical heretics. As before, whatever co-ordinated strikes they'd been hoping to make had clearly been massively disrupted, but enough survivors were getting through to make a considerable nuisance of themselves.

'Their first assault's been blunted,' Rorkins said at last, 'but that doesn't mean a lot by itself. They're still tying up far too many of our own people in keeping them contained.'

That much was obvious. The PDF were responding a lot more effectively than they had done to the first incursion, but then they had far fewer excuses for being taken by surprise this time round, so I'd have expected nothing less, and a few vox calls to the obvious slackers were sufficient to

put the fear of the Emperor into them; I've often found the casual mention of firing squads can be quite effective in focussing the attention.

The militia were getting stuck in as well, in a few places, but in just as disorganised a fashion as I'd expected, so the results of their assistance were mixed, to say the least. Few, if any, units were bothering to co-ordinate with the local PDF (who, in most cases, had their hands rather too full to spare them much attention in any case), so the ones which saw combat tended to be the ones which had just happened to be in the vicinity of a shuttle landing, grabbed their new weapons, and rushed off to defend their homes. Some fought tenaciously, as, if nothing else, they were strongly motivated, but more often than not they either fled as soon as they took a few casualties, or were simply wiped out to a man by the superior weaponry and tactics of the heretics. The one thing they did do well, however, was buy time, like they were supposed to, and by nightfall⁶⁶ nearly all the enemy beachheads were at least surrounded, and being prevented from spreading any further.

The downside, though, as Rorkins had pointed out some hours before, was that simply doing this much had left the resources at our disposal pretty much at full stretch. Emperor alone knew how we'd manage to deal with the Chaotic reinforcements when they arrived.

'My guess is they'll try to bolster the largest pockets of resistance,' Rorkins said, accepting the mug of recaf Jurgen handed to him without wincing, which alone was enough to tell me how exhausted he was. Julien had left by this time to harry the engineers from the Mechanicus shrine who were doing their best to bring the power armour her novitiates had been training in to something approaching battle readiness, although from what I'd seen they were going to have to burn an awful lot of incense to do that.

'Thank you, Jurgen.' I accepted my own mug gratefully, found myself briefly wondering if the sandwich accompanying it had come from the buffet in Chilinvale, then decided I was too hungry to care. 'Better grab something yourself. It's going to be a long night.'

'Very good, sir.' Jurgen retreated to a convenient corner, from which slurping and chewing noises shortly began to emanate, and I returned my attention to the hololith. The surface of Perlia was scattered with contact icons, like the rash of some virulent disease, and I studied the runes accompanying them for tactical data, trying to find the largest infestation. It

didn't take long, of course.

'The primary target seems to be the capital again,' I said, and Rorkins nodded wearily, zooming the image to enlarge the area around Havendown. Almost a dozen individual battles were continuing, some in the heart of the city itself, while a significant concentration of the enemy was clustered around the perimeter of Rytepat, clearly determined to take it as quickly as possible. Well, I could hardly fault them for that, the fighters based there were the single biggest threat to the secondary flotilla, and neutralising them would be high on Varan's to do list.

'Makes sense,' he agreed. 'If they take Havendown, and the Governor's palace, it'll be a tremendous blow to civilian morale. Even the orks couldn't manage it during the first siege.'

'Then we need to make sure the heretics don't either,' I said. The PDF were still holding the line, but it was going to be a close-run thing either way.

With a growing sense of foreboding, I saw Rorkins nod thoughtfully, and braced myself for the inevitable. 'Looks to me as if our people could do with a commissar breathing down their necks,' he said.

'It probably couldn't hurt,' I replied, as evenly as I could contrive, cursing my reputation for derring-do just as fervently as I always did when it backed me into some corner where I either had to risk my neck facing the enemy or lose the trust and respect of people I needed to impress in order to stand any chance of surviving at all. 'I'll see what Jorgen can find in the way of transport.'



Editorial Note:

As is his habit, Cain is less than forthcoming about the more general course of the siege, preferring, as usual, to concentrate on those aspects of it that inconvenienced him personally. Accordingly, I've appended the following brief extract, which gives a little of the wider picture.

From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127. M42.

The landing of the first wave of enemy troops was accomplished in the teeth of far fiercer resistance than the heretics would have expected, and the losses they sustained were considerable. Thanks to the astute placing of minefields by the SDF, the majority of the assault ships were severely damaged, and were unable to get their full complement of troopers deployed, but enough made it down to engage the defenders in pitched battles around strategic installations and centres of population across the entire globe. The regional command centres in Midvale and Follendyke were both taken after fierce fighting, the last defenders of the latter setting demolition charges as they retreated to deny any useful intelligence to the enemy, while over a dozen towns defended by no more than the citizen's militia which Commissar Cain had somewhat vaingloriously founded in imitation of his erstwhile compatriots of the First Siege were taken with barely a shot fired. To the amazement of the surviving civilians, instead of embarking on the expected orgy of looting and bloodshed, the occupying forces remained disciplined and in good order, merely imposing a curfew and awaiting the arrival of their leader.

They didn't have long to wait. The second wave of the flotilla arrived in orbit within hours, having been harassed the entire way by the surviving SDF boats, whose commander had adopted the unorthodox tactic of approaching at high speed, unleashing a barrage of ordnance at point-blank range, and continuing past the enemy convoy before it could bring its own weapons to bear. In the main this had little result beyond annoyance, but only one gunboat fell to return fire, the rest managing to retreat beyond effective range again before they could be targeted. Though Varan's heavy cruiser, the *Undefeatable*, was, naturally, the primary target of these forays, the lighter escorts accompanying it took the brunt of the damage, a couple of them apparently suffering minor degradation of their engines and auspex arrays, which may have rendered them a little less capable of defending themselves subsequently.

Despite these heroic endeavours, however, the *Undefeatable* took up its station above Havendown with no visible difficulty, and Varan joined the battle for the heart and soul of Perlia in person. Once again, persistent local legend puts Commissar Cain at the centre of this conflict, insisting that he and the warmaster fought one another hand to hand, although there is no reliable evidence to back up so fanciful a story.



SEVENTEEN

As we bounced and rattled along the highway to Havendown, Jurgen's driving as erratic as ever, I took advantage of the relative solitude and the clear night air to order my thoughts as best I could. I'd done everything possible to ensure the safety of the Shadowlight, although in all honesty that was looking tenuous at best, so now my highest priority should be getting through the rest of the night with my head still attached to my shoulders.

As we left the last few lights of the village behind us I glanced up, the open top of our Salamander affording me an excellent view of the night sky, and felt the breath still for a moment in my chest. The old familiar stars were still there, of course, even a few of the constellations I'd learned to pick out since taking up residence on Perlia: within moments I'd spotted the Slith⁶⁷ and the Adze, just as I'd expected to. Now, however, there was something new, a faint band of luminescence that stretched across the sky, like a narrower, dimmer echo of the milky way itself.

For a moment, I don't mind admitting, my heart hammered in my chest, as the panic-stricken thought that it was some kind of warp manifestation conjured up by Varan's sorcerers (or Felicia's merry meddlers in the Valley of Daemons poking away at things man was not meant to know) took hold of me, until reason reasserted itself, and I recognised the phenomenon for what it was. Even then, it was a thought to chill the blood: Perlia had a new ring system, made up of debris from the first wave of enemy ships that had blundered into Visiter's minefield. I was looking at a cloud of detritus, ranging in size from crippled starships over a kilometre in length down to chips of metal smaller than a fingernail paring, and I had little doubt that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of corpses floating about up there too. Of course it would be a relatively short-lived spectacle, as the tenuous

fringes of the atmosphere brushed at the tumbling debris, slowing the pieces enough to snare, and dragging them down to a final cremation; even now the sky was being streaked with lines of light, as the first brands entered the bonfire.⁶⁸

‘We’ll be there in about an hour,’ Jurgen informed me, his voice unexpectedly loud in my earpiece, and I nodded, before remembering that he couldn’t see me.

‘Very good, Jurgen,’ I responded, and propped myself up against the pintel mount of the heavy bolter I always like to have installed on any vehicle assigned to me. The Salamander’s built-in weapons are mounted facing forwards, which is seldom my direction of choice in the presence of the enemy, and the ability to throw some grief their way while retreating has saved my neck on more than one occasion. Besides, it lets me do something myself when things get sticky, which is always comforting, even when it’s not particularly effective, and it looks appropriately heroic, which never hurts when you’ve got a fraudulent reputation to maintain. ‘Better slow down a bit, we don’t want the cadets getting lost.’

‘No, commissar,’ my aide replied, with the faintest air of disappointment. ‘I suppose not.’ He’d opened up an impressive lead over the Salamander behind us on the twisting mountain road, but then Kayla still retained a residue of caution, despite the tendency of the young to believe that they’re immortal, and Jurgen had been honing his ability to push vehicles to the limit for the best part of a century. I’d been a little dubious about bringing the cadets along, to be honest, but they’d proven their mettle on the asteroid, and the situation in Havendown seemed so finely balanced that any extra edge we could gain seemed worth taking a chance on.

‘Are you all right back there?’ I voxed, keeping my voice casual, and peering down the road for the dark bulk of the trailing vehicle. There was no point in looking for lights, of course, as we had no intention of betraying our position to the enemy any more than we could help, and were proceeding entirely by the faint blue glow of the stars above our heads.⁶⁹ Fortunately our eyes had adjusted to the tenebrous glimmering by now, and I was able to discern the boundaries of the carriageway, as well as a mottling of darker shapes which showed the presence of something in the gloom beyond. What these silhouettes might be I had no idea, trees, rocks and field boundaries for the most part I suppose, interspersed with the occasional building, and I fought the tendency of my imagination to

populate them with unseen ambushers. I'd seen too many troopers spook themselves enough to open fire on innocuous shadows, only to be felled as soon as the muzzle flash betrayed their position to the enemy.

'We're fine,' Nelys assured me, with rather too much confidence for my liking. After a little thought, I'd selected him, Kayla and Donal to accompany me on this little expedition: Nelys because I knew he'd follow orders, Kayla because she'd keep him in line if we had to split the party, and I trusted her streak of common sense (which is all too rare, despite its name), and Donal because he still reminded me a little too closely of myself at that age, and Rorkins had enough trouble to worry about at the moment. That had left a fourth seat free in the sturdy little vehicle, which I'd filled with Briel, on the entirely reasonable grounds that he'd been the first of the remaining cadets to cross my path after selecting the other three.

'What's our primary target?' Kayla asked, as Jurgen slowed our breakneck progress to something on the order of merely alarming, and I began to make out the squared-off silhouette of the Salamander behind us.

To be honest, up until that point I'd still been debating the matter with myself, wondering where we were most likely to make a difference. The battle for Rytepat had pretty much stalemated by this point, and I'd been tempted to stick my nose in there, if only to maintain the fiction that the command bunkers at the heart of the PDF garrison were still the hub of the war effort. On the other hand, the heretics weren't actually gaining any ground, the runways were still clear enough to launch fighter sorties from, and I didn't think I could put up with the pompous idiots from the PDF high command for very long. (I suppose I could just have shot them all if they got too irritating, but that would have upset the junior officers who were actually doing some useful work, and, in any case, I thought I might need some of them around later to pin the blame on if things kept going north the way they had been.)⁷⁰ As so often, I've found, it's the little things that sway your judgement, and although I was to have no inkling of the fact at the time, my antipathy to the PDF grandees was shortly to save my life.

'The Governor's palace,' I said, after a moment spent trying to focus on the screen of my data-slate despite Jurgen's best efforts to send both it and me bouncing into the corner of the passenger compartment. The glow of the tiny pict was almost invisible, and would have been masked by the slabs of armour plate surrounding me in any case, so I felt any additional risk incurred by consulting it would be minimal. That was the next most obvious

target for the enemy to take, and the situation there seemed balanced on a knife edge, so that's where we'd intervene. I suppose I could have split the cadets up, and scattered them around the city to make nuisances of themselves with different units, but I wasn't entirely sure they were ready for that yet. The defence of the palace was crucial for morale, if nothing else, and if we lost it, the planet could very well follow.

After acknowledging my instructions the cadets went silent again, too disciplined for idle vox-chatter, and I resumed brooding for a while as the road rolled by under the treads of our vehicles. In fact we'd almost reached our destination before I heard another voice in my comm-bead.

'Is it sunrise already?' Briel asked, sounding a little confused. I hauled myself up on the pintel mount again, leaning against the heavy stock of the bolter as I peered over the rim of the armour plate. Sure enough, the sky ahead was tinted red and orange, the brighter colours seeping through the pre-dawn grey like ink on wet paper.

Surprised, I glanced at my chronograph, finding that it was at least an hour before Perlia's primary was due to poke its head over the horizon. A moment later we crested a ridge, our tracks seeming to part company with the carriageway for a moment before we jolted back onto the hardtop, and my forebodings were confirmed.

'That's not sunrise,' I told him, 'it's Havendown. The whole city's ablaze.'

By the time we got into the city itself, however, it had become obvious that my initial impression had been somewhat exaggerated, though not nearly as much so as I would have liked. Fires were indeed raging in several districts, replacing the sullen furnace glow which had brightened the night sky with lowering thunderheads of dense black smoke as daylight began to seep slowly through the curdled air, but most of the streets we roared along showed little or no evidence of the fighting, beyond the usual litter left behind by fleeing civilians. Now and again we passed more obvious signs of conflict, like hastily-erected barricades, subsequently breached (although which sides had taken which part in the brief sieges these lines commemorated was usually anybody's guess), or shops and hab blocks showing the unmistakable stigmata of heavy ordnance. More rarely, we passed the site of a pitched battle, with a gutted AFV or two still burning, and the occasional structure reduced to rubble; when this happened, Jurgen slowed, allowing the cadets to catch up, while we scanned the scene for

survivors. All the combatants we saw were dead, though, some in the uniforms of the Perlian PDF, the rest in the desecrated Imperial kit of the traitors from Madasa.

‘Don’t like the look of that, sir,’ Jurgen commented sourly, as we skirted the blazing wreck of a Leman Russ. The eight-pointed sigil of Chaos had been crudely daubed on the turret, still visible as the paint beneath it began to blister, and my aide spat in its general direction, almost managing to get the gobbet of phlegm over the lip of the armour plate protecting his driving compartment. ‘It was bad enough when the turncoats just had lasguns.’

‘It was only to be expected,’ I said, trying to sound more casual than I felt. ‘The Madasans must have had an armoured regiment or two on the books. Most PDFs do.’ Nevertheless, I’d been hoping that they’d been left behind to defend their home world against the inevitable Imperial counterattack, or lost in the general rush to abandon the stricken carriers.⁷¹

‘We’ll see them off anyway,’ Nelys assured me, his zeal once again appearing to override his common sense.

Kayla muttered something that sounded like ‘frakhead’ in my earpiece, but before I could say anything to forestall an incipient argument, a new voice cut in on the command frequency.

‘Commissar, can you hear me?’ Rorkins asked.

‘Yes, commander,’ I responded, observing the protocols for the benefit of the listening cadets. Donal had become visible in the Salamander behind us shortly after we entered the city limits, manning the heavy flamer; now he was glancing warily around as we proceeded up the street, away from the remnants of the engagement. For a moment I found myself thinking it was lucky I’d chosen him to join the party instead of Stebbins. The thought of the havoc that young man might wreak with an incendiary weapon was a sobering one indeed. ‘What’s happening?’ Something serious clearly, or he’d never have bothered contacting me directly.

‘The enemy’s here,’ Rorkins said, his voice tense. ‘The second wave is moving into orbit.’

‘Any further casualties?’ I asked hopefully, not that I expected any, but after the damage he’d done to the first wave, I was prepared to credit Visiter with the ability to work miracles.

‘No, they all made it,’ Rorkins said, his voice unusually clear for a comm-bead signal from so distant a source. It was being relayed through the vox set in the Salamander, of course, but that alone wouldn’t account for such

exceptionally good reception. Then I realised it must have been relayed through the command bunker at Rytepat as well, a mere handful of kilometres away.

Before I could reply, though, the sky turned white, all colour leached from it by a flare of harsh, actinic energy of almost inconceivable magnitude. Fortunately the buildings of the city blocked any direct line of sight we might have had, or we would all have been struck blind in an instant. A moment later the ground trembled, windows shattered, and a rain of debris pattered down around us, dislodged from the structures we drove between. Jurgen jammed on his brakes, but decades of familiarity with his driving had left me prepared for this, and I kept my feet with relative ease.

‘What the hell was that?’ Kayla asked, slewing the second Salamander sideways, and crushing a parked groundcar under its tracks before coming to a halt with its nose embedded in the plinth of a remarkably ugly statue of a remarkably ugly man, which disfigured the middle of the square we’d been passing through.

‘Orbital strike,’ I said, having seen something similar on a few occasions before. ‘Probably the lance batteries of a warship.’ An uncomfortable itching sensation began to grow between my shoulder blades as we waited for the next one. In my experience, once Chaos commanders started popping off heavy ordnance from space, they wouldn’t be happy until they’d levelled anything in the vicinity taller than an anthill. I began to think about the fastest way out of the city, concentrating so hard on the map-slate that it took a moment for me to register that the bombardment hadn’t been repeated, and that Rorkins’s voice in my comm-bead was far more attenuated than before.

‘Rytepat’s been obliterated,’ he told me soberly. ‘Better get out of the city while you can.’ The familiar hissing of static in my ear was supplemented for a moment by a quartet of indrawn breaths from the stunned cadets.

‘Well, we expected them to try and neutralise it,’ I said, trying to sound as calm as I could, despite the shock which still had me trembling. That was true enough, but the number of troops they’d committed to besieging the place had led us to expect a conventional assault. The only positive side to this surprising development was that they’d undoubtedly polished off a company or two of their own people along with our own. ‘Varan must be in a hurry.’ Which was a disquieting thought in its own right, of course, although I couldn’t explain why to Rorkins, especially over a comm-net that

might be monitored. The only reason I could see for the warmaster to casually overkill a strategic installation he could probably have taken intact in a few more days, and made good use of during the subsequent occupation, was because he was impatient to pacify the planet and start looking for the Shadowlight as quickly as possible.

‘Well, it confirms his insanity,’ Rorkins said bluntly. ‘I suggest you pull out the way you went in; they’ll probably start hitting the city close to Rytepat, and work their way across.’

‘I don’t think they’re going to,’ I said, having managed to orientate myself at last. ‘If they were going to fire again, they would have done so by now.’ We’d had plenty of time to confirm the make-up of the enemy fleet as they coasted in, and Visiter had sent us what pict and auspex records he’d been able to grab on his attack runs to supplement our existing intelligence, so I was certain that they could have unleashed at least half a dozen lance blasts by now, not to mention the widespread devastation which would have been inflicted by the less accurate primary batteries of the warships in orbit. ‘If Varan wanted to level the city, he’d already have done it.’

‘Then why’s he holding off?’ Donal asked, reasonably enough under the circumstances.

‘Because he’s planning an assault,’ I said, ‘and he wanted our defences weakened as much as possible. He obviously doesn’t know we shifted our command centre after the first attack.’ I glanced at the map-slate again, confirming my impression of our whereabouts. ‘We’re heading on to the Governor’s palace.’ If nothing else, the wide gardens would offer our best chance of evading another orbital strike if I turned out to be wrong, as they were a long way from any tempting targets.

‘Makes sense,’ Rorkins said. ‘Extract his excellency and drag him back here, before Varan gets his hands on him. If you can locate the heir as well, even better; we’ll need symbols of resistance once Havendown falls.’

‘If Havendown falls,’ I corrected him, more to play the part of the dutiful commissar than because I thought there was the remotest chance of him being wrong.

‘If. Of course,’ Rorkins said, with heavy irony, and cut the link.

‘The palace, then,’ I said, while Jurgen gunned our engine, and Kayla reversed gingerly out from under the tottering statue.

If I’d had any lingering doubts about the right direction they were soon

dispelled, as the familiar sounds of combat soon became apparent, even over the roaring of our engines. The enemy were still surrounding the palace, at least according to the latest tactical information I had available, but I thought I'd identified a weak spot in their lines near one of the side gates. The main concentration of heretics was busy trying to force an entrance at the front, where the buildings of the city came closest to the wall, affording the best cover, while only a relatively small detachment had been left to guard a remote postern, generally used only by gardeners maintaining the grounds. A squad or two of the PDF had been dug in on the other side, to discourage any attempt at breaching it, and the two factions were amusing themselves by taking largely ineffectual pot-shots at one another over the wall.

It was hard to tell which of them was the most surprised by our sudden appearance, heretics or loyalists, although on balance it was probably the enemy. We roared into the street behind them, bearing down on their position from behind, opening fire as we came. Jurgen triggered our hull-mounted bolter, chewing the barricade they'd erected across the end of the street facing the gateway to pieces, along with a sandbagged autocannon and its crew, while I swung the pintel mount, gouging a line of holes along the row of windows overlooking the thoroughfare, certain that I must have bagged a sharpshooter or two hoping to get a line of sight on the defenders from an elevated position. The spark of a las-bolt impacting on the armour close to my head informed me that, though the idea was sound, I might have picked the wrong side of the street to put it into practice, but before I could swing the heavy weapon round to retaliate a blast of heat and the stink of burning promethium forestalled me. Donal had triggered the heavy flamer on the second Salamander, hosing down the hostelry from which the shot had come, and leaving it blazing merrily.

'Thank you,' I voxed, and he waved cheerfully.

'You're welcome, sir.' He glanced down. 'Come on, Nel, find a traitor to shoot. You're missing all the fun.'

Nelys was manning the forward-facing bolter, but just about all he'd see through the sights from that angle was the back of our Salamander, so I hoped he'd be able to resist the temptation to open up at random. No sooner had I completed the thought than he triggered the heavy weapon, and I flinched, anticipating a rain of armour-piercing projectiles against our rear plating, but he'd judged it to a nicety, taking out another sandbagged

weapon emplacement just barely visible at the corner of the street. He whooped as the gunner's torso erupted in a crimson mist. 'Yes!'

'Boys,' Kayla muttered, a trifle enviously I thought, and tucked in behind us as Jurgen bounced our tracks over the remains of the barricade he'd shredded. A few desultory las-bolts were still spanging off the hull armour, so I sprayed a few suppressive rounds to keep the survivors' heads down, and Donal swept the nearest storefronts with another burst from the flamer for good measure.

Luckily the defenders were alert; a few heads appeared at the top of the wall, popping up like startled snowhens, and began to lay down some more suppressive fire, while someone began to pull the gates open. I flinched, anticipating a collision, but Jurgen cut our speed just enough for them to finish the job, and we shot through the widening gap with centimetres to spare. Kayla followed, a little more sedately, and leaving a layer of paint on the thick stone gatepost, then the slab of timber slammed back into place behind us.

'Sir.' The sergeant in charge of the PDF detachment snapped a salute, trying not to gawp at me, while the men under his command didn't even bother making the attempt.

I returned the salute crisply. 'Good morning, sergeant. Sorry to barge in unannounced, but we're in a bit of a hurry. Could you present Commissar Cain's compliments to the governor, and inform him I'd like a word at his earliest convenience?' I could have done it myself, of course, over the comm-bead, but I had no desire to work my way through innumerable flunkies demanding proof of my identity.

'Of course, sir.' The sergeant beckoned his vox-operator over, and began to speak urgently in an undertone, with several covert glances in our direction.

'Very good,' I said, and leaned over to talk to Jurgen. 'The palace, Jurgen, quick as you can.'

'Right you are, sir,' my aide replied cheerfully, revving the engine to a pitch which would have had a tech-priest howling almost as much in protest had there been one in the vicinity, and slipping in the clutch. True to form he took my words literally, accelerating across a wide formal lawn and crashing through a hedge, leaving twin furrows of gouged earth in our wake. By the time we'd arrived at our destination, a handful of minutes later, he'd also accounted for several flower beds, a scattering of shrubs,

and a small statue of a young woman wearing rather too little for the time of year. Kayla followed, compounding the damage, but not by much.⁷²

‘Commissar.’ Trevellyan himself was waiting at the bottom of the steps leading up to a wide formal terrace, and greeted us affably as we drew up beneath the balustrade, our engines idling. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘You can come with us, sir,’ I told him, dismounting in order to shake hands. It might seem an odd time to be observing the proprieties quite so punctiliously, but if I read the man right, on our brief earlier acquaintance, he’d find at least the appearance of adhering to protocol reassuring. ‘Your safety is vital to the security of Perlia.’ Which might have been overstating the case a little, but I’ve yet to meet an aristo without an inflated sense of their own importance, and playing up to it can often persuade them to co-operate.

Trevellyan looked confused. ‘I can’t just leave,’ he said. ‘This building is the centre of Imperial power. What sort of message does it send to the populace if I just cut and run?’

‘That you’re still alive?’ I suggested, trying to keep an edge of irritation from my voice. ‘The enemy has already destroyed the PDF command centre by orbital bombardment, and they could just as easily obliterate the palace.’

‘Then why haven’t they?’ Trevellyan asked, reasonably enough, and I tried to keep my own voice conversational as I replied.

‘I have no idea,’ I admitted. ‘But we’re dealing with Chaos worshipping loonies, don’t forget. Their strategies don’t always make sense to anyone else, at least to begin with.’

‘Then it seems to me that I’m as safe here as anywhere else,’ the Governor said.

‘With respect, sir,’ I began, ‘that is no longer your decision to make.’ I became aware that my voice was rising, and made an effort to sound calmer; only then did I realise that I’d been speaking more loudly because the ambient noise had risen about us.

‘Incoming!’ Briel shouted, glancing up from the miniature auspex in the back of the second Salamander,⁷³ and gesturing towards the east. I raised my hand, shielding my eyes against the glare, and was just able to make out a trio of fast-moving dots, closing on our position.

‘Assault shuttles,’ Nelys reported, a pair of amplivisors to his eyes. ‘Three of them, descending fast.’

‘Inside!’ I snapped. ‘We’re sitting waterfowl out here!’ I half expected Trevellyan to argue, but he simply nodded, bolting up the steps to the terrace and disappearing through the wide glass doors leading into the conservatory beyond. I began to follow, then glanced back. ‘That means everyone!’

The cadets piled out of the Salamander, and pelted after us. A moment later Jurgen’s distinctive odour joined me, followed almost at once by the man himself, his precious melta cradled in his arms.

‘Looks like they’re coming down in the grounds,’ he said, and I held out my hand for the amplivisor Nelys was still carrying.

‘They are,’ I confirmed, focussing the device, as the quartet of cadets scurried past me into the building, drawing their weapons as they ran. Confident that the enemy wouldn’t be down and deployed for several minutes yet I lingered a little longer, partly to play up to my undeserved reputation for coolness under fire, but mainly because the more you know about the enemy, the better prepared you are to deal with them.

Unlike the commandeered civilian vessels, which had delivered most of the first wave and the preliminary raiders, the three shuttles were military drop-ships, heavily armoured, and carrying enough weaponry for close air support. The PDF guarding the palace opened up with commendable promptness as soon as they came into range, but the barrage of autocannon rounds and sporadic rockets from hand-held launchers barely scratched the paintwork as the menacing formation continued to descend. All the defenders really succeeded in doing was pinpointing their positions, the ones bracketing the shuttles’ flight path falling silent almost at once as the drop-ships’ nose-mounted lascannons retaliated to deadly effect. I half expected the pilots to break off and go looking for fresh targets once those were eliminated, but, once again, they seemed remarkably focussed for minions of Chaos, continuing their descent as smoothly and efficiently as Imperial Navy veterans would have done.

‘That’s it, we’re leaving,’ I said, as the first landing skids sank into the lawn, which browned and then blackened under the fierce heat of the landing thrusters. Nevertheless, despite the urgent demands of my sense of self-preservation, something held me there a moment longer. I’ve never liked facing an unknown enemy, and preferred not to take to my heels without finding out what was most likely to be following.

They’d chosen their landing site well, I was forced to concede; with the

nearest defenders swept away by the strafing run I'd witnessed, the fall of the ground would enable them to disembark without facing much in the way of incoming fire. Of course that would also give us time to redeploy our own people to meet them, which wouldn't do them a lot of good in the long run, I hoped. I focussed the amplivisor again, grateful for the augmetic fingers on my right hand, which let me hold the device perfectly steady, despite the distance; the only faint trembling of the image I could see was due to my heartbeat, which was a little faster than usual, but no more than you'd expect under the circumstances.

As I watched, the boarding ramps descended, and figures began to move inside the shadowed bellies of the shuttles. It was hard to make anything out yet, but the bulk of them was unmistakable: power armour. A thrill of sheer terror shot through me at the thought of facing what looked suspiciously like at least three full squads of Traitor Marines, and I swung the amplivisor back and forth, hoping to find some clue as to who they were. Then someone else stepped out onto the ramp, and, if anything, my apprehension increased. Dwarfed by the hulking figures that flanked him, the unmistakable figure of Varan himself strolled down the metal incline, and finally set foot on Perlia.



EIGHTEEN

‘The situation’s worse than I thought,’ I told Trevellyan, with what I felt to be commendable understatement. The conservatory beyond the terrace had led us into the palace itself, and now we were hurrying along a corridor lined with wooden panels and works of art, which none of us had either the time or the inclination to pause and admire. The one thing I’d been pleased to see was a burly PDF sergeant and a full squad of troopers lugging a large bookcase and a dining table from an adjacent room to form a reassuringly solid-looking barricade in the middle of the passageway, which ought to hold the enemy for a short time: a very short time if I was right about the identities of our unwelcome visitors, but any respite would be useful in getting the Governor, and, more importantly, myself, to safety. ‘The enemy obviously means to occupy the palace, and no doubt assassinate you in the process.’

‘Thus spreading alarm and despondency among the populace, I take it,’ Trevellyan said, sounding remarkably calm about the whole thing, but then I suppose he was as used to hiding his true feelings as I was.

‘Whereas we’d rather have you alive and kicking, to boost morale and stiffen their resistance,’ I said. ‘So where’s your escape route?’

‘Escape route?’ Trevellyan said, with studied ingenuousness.

I nodded tightly. ‘I’ve never known a Governor without a contingency plan for saving his hide if the peasants revolt,’ I said, ‘even on the most well-ordered worlds.’ I hardened my voice a little. ‘And believe me, your excellency, we don’t have time for diplomatic games.’ For a moment my paranoia threw up the alarming possibility that this man was the unique exception, and that I’d run straight into a trap, my blithe assumption that there was bound to be a way out of here completely wrong. (Of course it

had been this belief that had persuaded me to chance running for the palace in the first place, instead of following Rorkins's original suggestion and heading straight back to the schola while we'd had the chance.)

After a moment, though, Trevellyan nodded. 'There's a passageway down to the undercity,' he conceded, 'in my private chambers.' A faintly defensive tone entered his voice. 'Built by one of my predecessors, centuries ago. I've never been down there myself, of course.'

'Of course,' I echoed, not really caring much either way. (Although I was to be grateful enough for the snippet of information later on.) 'Which way?' The sound of gunfire was audible in the distance now, and the cadets exchanged apprehensive looks. Another squad of PDF troopers doubled past us, their faces set, obviously intending to reinforce their comrades at the barricade further down the corridor; an unmistakably expensive-sounding crash informed me that another solid antique had just been thrown on to the pile, and the Governor winced a little.

'Through here,' Trevellyan said, leading us into a surprisingly tasteful suite of rooms. Bright sunlight slanted in through windows giving what, under most circumstances, would have been a pleasant view of the grounds, which had now been disfigured by the scattered bodies of a dozen or so PDF troopers. In the distance, power-armoured figures were advancing inexorably on a detachment of dug-in defenders, shrugging off most of the lasgun fire directed at them, although one staggered and fell before drifting smoke obscured the rest of the engagement. Despite the fact that they were too far away to see clearly, something about them struck me as unnervingly familiar, but the nagging sense of recognition wouldn't quite gel, and I had more pressing matters to attend to at the moment in any case.

We hurried through a drawing room full of sofas and armchairs, ranged about a fireplace which looked as though it would have been mortally offended by the merest particle of ash, and a dining room which would comfortably have seated a dozen people, before ducking down another wide, well-carpeted corridor. I picked up my pace as the crackle of small arms fire suddenly sounded close at hand, the distinctive *crack!* of ionising air made by lasguns overlaid with the ripping sound of bolters, telling me that the enemy had already made it as far as the barricade in the hall we'd so recently vacated.

The palms of my hands began to itch, a sure sign that something was deeply wrong; Traitor Marines were formidable, I knew, from bitter

personal experience, but even they should have been held up a little longer by our outer defences. Then the firing from the corridor went silent too, as completely and suddenly as if someone had just thrown a switch.

‘That’s not right,’ Donal said. ‘I’ll go and see what’s happening.’

‘You’ll stay right where you are!’ I snapped back. The whole thing had the stink of sorcery about it if you asked me, and mindful of the conversation I’d had with Julien and Rorkins, I was suddenly convinced that the only logical explanation for the sudden and total collapse of resistance was the presence of a remarkably powerful psyker among Varan’s entourage. Which meant in turn that the only chance we had of getting out of here with whole skins was for everyone to stick close enough to Jurgen to gain the benefit of his remarkable gift. I turned to the Governor. ‘Now would be a good time to show off your ancestor’s handiwork,’ I suggested, as mildly as I could under the circumstances.

Trevellyan nodded, his face paling. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘This way.’ As I’d expected, the entrance to the bolt hole was in his bedroom; for some reason that’s where the majority of them seem to be located, either in the expectation that the peasants would be inconsiderate enough to revolt out of office hours, or so that whoever built them could sneak off the premises on personal business without any of their staff noticing their absence.⁷⁴

‘Better make it fast,’ I suggested, following him through the door. I glanced back at Jurgen and the cadets. ‘Cover the end of the corridor. That’s where they’ll come from.’

‘Very good, sir,’ Jurgen said, already directing the melta down the passageway, while the quartet of cadets took what cover they could behind convenient doorways, or the occasional tables scattered along the length of the hall.

‘Is your niece on the premises too?’ I asked Trevellyan, as he began to shoulder aside an over-ornamented wardrobe, which looked as though it had been standing there since the Emperor was in short trousers. If she was, she was on her own so far as I was concerned, but there was no harm in making a show of interest in our secondary objective. The huge lump of timber seemed in no hurry to budge, so I put my shoulder to it as well, and between us we managed to shift the blasted thing just far enough to reveal a genecode scanner and the faint outline of a narrow doorway set into the wall.

‘Illyria?’ Trevellyan shook his head. ‘No, she’s gone hunting. She’s

staying at the lodge on the Marksell estate.' I hadn't a clue where that was, but no doubt Rorkins could send someone to pick her up or look after her, as soon as I got the chance to tell him; I wasn't about to trust information that sensitive to the vox.

'Well, that's something, anyway,' I said, while Trevellyan slapped his hand to the reader plate. For an agonising moment nothing seemed to be happening, then the panel in the wall swung back, releasing a cloud of dust and the faintly cloacal smell which told me beyond all reasonable doubt that somewhere the passageway behind it connected to the sewers.

'Commissar, they're here!' Kayla called, her voice tightly controlled, and echoing a fraction of a second later in my comm-bead. Cursing, I drew my laspistol, and hurried across to the door. Running footsteps could be heard approaching along the corridor, and I aimed carefully at the intersection, around which our pursuers would be coming. To my relief, though, the tread was of booted feet, not the ponderous thudding of power armour, and I began to relax a little.

'Hold your fire until you're certain of a target,' I said, holding my weapon on aim regardless. My caution seemed justified a moment later, when the PDF troopers we'd last seen manning the barricade behind us pelted into view. Disconcerting that they'd apparently turned and fled so precipitously, but under the circumstances I was prepared to make allowances: even Imperial Guard troopers would have thought twice about standing their ground in front of the Traitor Legions, although I'd have hoped that they'd have retreated in rather better order. Still, if I could bring them to heel and take them along with us, that would be no bad thing: I've never been averse to a bit more cannon fodder standing between me and harm's way.

Even so, I kept my pistol up, the palms of my hands itching more strongly than ever, although, as so often, I couldn't have pinpointed the exact reason for my disquiet.

'It's all right, they're ours!' Briel said, his voice ringing with relief, and moving out into the corridor just as the running troopers brought their lasguns up. That was what had been bothering me, I suddenly realised, they'd been holding them like men advancing to contact, not running from an enemy behind them. Before I could shout a warning, however, they'd opened fire. Briel took four or five las-bolts in the chest, which practically cut him in half, and staggered back, an almost comical expression of astonishment on his face. No point in risking anyone's neck dragging him

back into cover; he was quite clearly on his way to the Golden Throne even before he hit the carpet, which was now considerably messier.

‘Death to the servants of the Corpse-God!’ the sergeant shouted, and we returned fire with a will, eager to avenge our own. At least the surviving cadets were; Jurgen and I were too seasoned a pair of campaigners to take Briel’s loss personally, at least while the more pressing matter of our own survival was taking up most of our attention. The front rank of onrushing traitors faltered under the barrage of las-bolts we unleashed, a couple in the front rank falling, where they tripped the charging troopers most closely behind, and Jurgen’s melta accounted for a small group at the back.

‘Disengage!’ I shouted, beckoning our survivors into the Governor’s bedroom. We’d slowed the enemy charge, but I was under no illusion that the next wave would be so easily dealt with, nor, for that matter, that our erstwhile allies were completely out of the fight either. Whatever had turned their minds seemed to have left them as fanatical as the Madasans I’d encountered before, and even as Jurgen and the others began to pull back to join me my worst forebodings were confirmed. The troopers who’d escaped injury, or had only suffered superficial wounds, opened fire again almost without pause.

Almost, but not quite. Kayla and Nelys had just had time to scurry to safety before the barrage resumed, and my nose told me that Jurgen was all right even before my eyes had registered his presence, but Donal hadn’t been so lucky. He’d been halfway across the corridor from his refuge in the opposite doorway when the enemy had begun firing again, and a couple of rounds hit him in the chest and knee. He fell, dangerously exposed in the middle of the expanse of carpeting.

‘Cover him!’ I snapped, hoping he’d be able to crawl to safety, but the lad was twitching like a freshly-landed fish, unable to rise, and leaking like a colander. Bright red blood was staining the front of his greatcoat, turning the black fabric an unpleasant mushy rust colour before dripping to the floor, and his face was greying.

‘Very good, sir.’ Jurgen poked the melta round the doorframe, and sent a blast of ravening heat down the hallway. This time his shot drifted a little high, setting fire to the wood panelling, but sending the turncoats attacking us scrambling back to the junction of the corridor, leaving their dead and wounded lying where they’d fallen.

I hesitated for a moment, but even as I overcame my reluctance to move, I

knew I had no choice. If I just left the lad to bleed to death, or worse, fall into the hands of the enemy, I'd lose the respect of the surviving cadets, and I needed them to follow my lead without hesitation if I was going to get out of this with a whole skin. And then there was Trevellyan to consider. So far as he was concerned, I was the legendary Liberator, the warrior who'd saved his planet once before, and even the merest hint that I was just as fallible as anyone else would probably end any chance we had of using him to rally the populace against the invader. Taking a deep breath, I loosed a couple of las-bolts in the general direction of the enemy, and popped out of the doorway as abruptly as my mechanical replica on that ghastly timepiece in Liberation Square.

Time seemed to slow, as it so often does when I'm in imminent danger of death, and I had plenty of time to note my surroundings while I hoisted Donal to his feet and sent another couple of shots down the corridor for good measure. Satisfied that the only enemy still moving that I could see was a trooper who'd been too severely singed by Jurgen to last more than a few minutes in any case, I began to back away, keeping the wounded cadet between myself and any more incoming fire. After all, he'd already been shot twice, so another dent or two probably wouldn't make that much difference to him, whereas I was still up and running, and had every intention of keeping it that way.

It was only as I made it to the doorway that I realised the expiring trooper a handful of metres away wasn't just twitching at random, he was still moving with evident and malevolent purpose; something I should have expected after my encounter with the Madasans at Rytepat. I shot him at once, but it was already too late, the grenade he'd been priming rolling along the carpet towards us.

'Grenade!' I yelled, rotating Donal and myself around the doorframe to seek sanctuary against the other side of the wall (and knocking a filigreed nightstand to the floor in the process, but I was past worrying about taking good care of the furniture by that time). Jurgen reacted instantly, flattening himself against the wall on the other side of the doorway, while Kayla and Nelys flung themselves to the floor behind the well-upholstered bed. (No doubt grateful for the thick carpeting.)

Only Trevellyan stood still in bemusement, trying to comprehend what was going on around him. Emperor only knows what he was still doing there, rather than scuttling down the escape hole like he was supposed to:

perhaps he thought protocol demanded that he be the last to leave. If so, it was a gesture of good manners which was to cost him dear. He just had time to ask 'What did you...' before the frag charge exploded, fortunately for the rest of us in the corridor outside, rather than inside the room. Shards of shrapnel hissed through the air, and the luckless Governor, who folded like a sack of grain that's been used once too often for bayonet practice.

'He's in a bad way,' Nelys told me a moment later, quite unnecessarily. I'd seen enough battlefield trauma in my life to be quite certain that the Governor was well beyond any help we could give him in the time we had available.

I turned to Jurgen, who was applying a pressure bandage to an ugly hole in Donal's chest; by the greatest piece of bad luck, it seemed, one of the noncoms among the turncoats had a stubber for a sidearm, and had been using that in preference to the lasweapons of his compatriots. Las-bolts are nasty enough, it's true, incapacitating, often fatally, by thermal shock, but the upside is that if you survive a hit, they usually cauterise the wounds they inflict. Bullets, on the other hand, don't, leaving you to bleed, with fatal consequences if someone can't staunch it for you. 'How's Donal?' I asked.

'I've felt better,' Donal said, with a touch of his old insouciance, although it was obvious to me how hard he had to work at maintaining it.

Jurgen shook his head. 'He needs a chirurgeon,' he told me bluntly. Well he wasn't about to get one around here.

'Just do the best you can,' I said. 'Patch him up enough to get moving.'

Jurgen nodded, although his expression told me all I needed to know about what he thought of that idea.

Fortunately, Donal saved him the bother of putting his thoughts into words.

'I'm not going anywhere,' he said. 'I'm bleeding like a stuck grox, and even if I last long enough to get down the hole, I'll only hold you up.' It seemed I'd misjudged the lad after all. He hauled himself into a sitting position, a trifle woozily, and hefted his laspistol as though it weighed twice as much as it usually did. 'I'll buy you as much time as I can, but it won't be much. Make the best of it.'

'We will,' I promised him, and turned to Nelys. 'Can his excellency be moved yet?'

'Don't patronise me, young man,' Trevellyan said, looking and sounding his true age at last. 'I'm past help, and we both know it. The least I can do is

follow the good example of your protégé.' He coughed, spraying his immediate vicinity with a thin dusting of blood. 'You'll find a bolt pistol in that cabinet over there. If you'd be kind enough to load it for me, I'll be honoured to assist him.'

'Nelys,' I said, 'get the Governor his gun. I've something else to take care of before we leave.'

Moved by an impulse I couldn't quite explain, I unwound the crimson sash from around my waist, and handed it to Donal. 'I think you've more than earned this today,' I told him. 'Well done, commissar.'

'Thank you, sir.' Donal swallowed, his voice taking on an unfamiliar huskiness. 'I'll try to be worthy of it.' We stared at one another for a further moment of inarticulate embarrassment, then to our mutual relief Kayla called out from the doorway.

'Here they come!' She sent a volley of las-bolts down the corridor, and ducked back inside the room just ahead of a barrage of return fire.

With a tingle of apprehension I felt the floor flexing gently beneath my feet, in the rhythm of an unhurried stride, and knew we were out of time. A few seconds later the unmistakable thudding of power-armoured feet echoed down the passageway.

'Aim for the joints,' I advised Donal and the Governor, putting a las-bolt through the genocode reader by the hidden door as I spoke; it was all too easy to picture Trevellyan, or more likely his corpse, being hoisted up by augmented muscle to trigger it. Not that I expected so flimsy a barrier to delay a Traitor Marine for very long, but even that minor advantage would be worth having. 'It's the best chance of getting through their armour.' I turned to Kayla and Nelys. 'Go, now.'

For a moment I thought they might argue, but they complied straight away, disappearing through the gap into the darkness beyond. I followed, not needing to look to be certain that Jurgen was hard on my heels, and glanced back into the room. Enough light fell through the portal to illuminate the closing mechanism, which my aide triggered with the butt of his melta, keeping the weapon aimed through the narrowing gap as it started to swing shut behind us.

The last sight I had of the room beyond was Donal and Trevellyan levelling their weapons, and shadows moving in the doorway beyond them, too bulky to be anything other than what I'd feared. Then the hidden panel thudded into place, and darkness swallowed us completely.

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NINETEEN

Fortunately, as I'd expected, Jorgen had a luminator somewhere about his person, and a moment later, to my pleased surprise, Kayla produced another one from the pocket of her greatcoat, enabling us to get our first clear view of our surroundings. The hidden room adjacent to the Governor's chambers turned out to contain nothing but a spiral staircase, to my vast relief too narrow for anyone in power armour to negotiate, which descended vertically for a dozen metres or so, before opening out into a passageway just wide enough for us to hurry along in single file, our shoulders almost brushing the walls, and our footsteps echoing from the bare brick hemming us in.

Jorgen led the way at a rapid trot, the luminator he'd found among his profusion of webbing pouches attached to the bayonet lugs of his lasgun, and the butt of the hastily-shouldered melta thudding rhythmically against the crumbling masonry. Every time it struck the wall, a cloud of dust and powdered brickwork stung my eyes and scratched the back of my throat; clearly the Governor hadn't been exaggerating about the length of time that had passed since the passageway had last been used. I followed hard on my aide's heels, then Kayla, with Nelys bringing up the rear, the bulk of his body obscuring the lights we carried from any pursuers behind us. I strained my ears for any indication that the wall panel had been breached, but either Donal and the Governor were managing to hold off the enemy for longer than I'd expected, or the hidden portal had been strongly reinforced against just such a contingency as this.

After a few minutes we entered the undercity proper, a warren of service ducts, sewage tunnels, and built-over cellars from long-forgotten structures, which felt reassuringly like the lower hive levels I'd played in as a child.

Once or twice we even found ourselves running along recognisable streets, the porticos of ancient buildings, now metres below the dwellings of their builders' descendants, crumbling around us.

'I never knew there was anything like this down here,' Kayla said, a tinge of awe entering her voice as she swept the beam of her luminator along the entablature of a sagging chapel, from which the dust-shrouded image of Him on Earth glowered down at us, as though cranky about being disturbed. Nelys bowed his head and made the sign of the aquila as we passed, but the rest of us just kept going as quickly as possible. I still hadn't heard any signs of pursuit, just the usual scufflings of rodents and the occasional human outcast, both equally startled and keen to avoid a group of people carrying weapons with evident purpose, but that didn't mean Varan hadn't dispatched a search party after us; just that they hadn't caught up yet.

'You'll find something like it under most Imperial cities,' I told her, more to keep my mind off the worrying possibility of potential pursuit than anything else, but if it gave her and Nelys something to think about other than the loss of Donal and Briel that would be no bad thing. At least her curiosity about the unfamiliar environment was an encouraging sign that she was staying focussed. 'As they grow and develop over the millennia, the lower levels get built on and forgotten about. Some of the places I've been have undercities more than a kilometre thick.'

'It's amazing to think no one ever goes down there,' Nelys said.

'But they do,' I told him. 'You'll find tech-priests and maintenance workers in the upper levels, of course, looking after the infrastructure of the city, and all sorts of lowlifes too: gangers, illegal gambling dens, crims on the run, anyone whose business is better carried on out of sight. Below that, you come to the deep levels, where things get really bad. That's where you'll find the mutants and heretic cults, fugitive psykers, and worse.'

'What could be worse than that?' Kayla asked, and I silently reproved myself for spooking her any more than she already was. Pushing away the sudden mental image of blank-faced metal killers, I shrugged.

'Plenty. But I doubt you'll find anything like that below Havendown, even at the bottom levels.' I tried to make my voice as reassuring as I could. 'Besides, I grew up in the deeps of my old hive before the schola took me in, down near the sump, and I survived. Got off-world, too, which is more than most tunnel rats can say.' I injected a note of slightly forced levity into my tone. 'This is all quite homely, really.' Then I broke off, suddenly aware

of a change in the echoes around us. ‘Down here, and douse the lights.’

I led the way into a narrow cleft between two slabs of fallen rockcrete, which a faint draught had already informed me concealed a wider space behind, and the others followed at once, Jurgen and Kayla clicking off their luminators with commendable promptness. In the sudden darkness I heard the faint susurrations of sliding fabric as Jurgen unslung his melta, holding it ready for use, and I drew my laspistol.

‘What is it?’ Nelys whispered, then subsided as Kayla elbowed him in the ribs.

Even if I could have answered him, there was no need to; a faint glow was approaching, accompanied by a scuffling of footfalls, which sounded somehow wrong, as though the legs they were attached to weren’t working properly, which in many cases they weren’t. As the crowd came into view, both cadets gasped, audibly, but fortunately not loudly enough to give away our positions. Many of the individuals comprising it looked like people, more or less, but others didn’t, too hideously deformed to even bother trying to conceal the way their flesh had revolted. Some carried weapons, a few firearms visible in the baleful glow that illuminated their progress, but most carried far cruder armaments; crossbows fashioned from scavenged fragments of metal and wood, serrated blades, and heavy clubs.

All told, they didn’t look like much, and I had no doubt that we could have slaughtered the lot of them with little difficulty if we’d been so inclined, but I refrained from ordering the others to open fire. For one thing, if Varan really had dispatched a kill team after us, the gunfire would draw them to our position like flies to Jurgen on a warm summer morning, and, for another, there was that eerie blue glow lighting their way. It had no visible source, hovering over their heads as they shuffled along, and the only explanation I could think of for that was the obvious one; somewhere among the crowd of abominations was a psyker, with Emperor alone knew what other abilities. Of course, whatever they were, Jurgen would neutralise them, of that I had no doubt, but it would only take one mutant to escape and report what had happened to the enemy for Varan to know that there was a blank at large somewhere on Perlia, and the longer I could keep that particular Emperor up my sleeve, the better I liked it. If the warmaster was really as reliant on psykers as I’d deduced, Jurgen’s peculiar ability could turn out to be crucial. (In this I was right, but in a manner I couldn’t possibly have predicted at the time.)

So we stayed put, hardly daring to breathe (which in a confined space with Jurgen was an activity best kept to a minimum in any case), while the eldritch glow and the arrhythmic shuffling faded away into the distance.

‘I thought you said the mutants were confined to the lower levels,’ Nelys said, in a faintly aggrieved tone, and I nodded, having determined that it was safe to kindle the luminators again.

‘They usually are,’ I said, grimly. ‘They must have heard about the invasion, and come up to join in the fun.’

‘Then we need to get that information to Commander Rorkins as soon as possible,’ Nelys said, and I nodded again.

‘My thoughts exactly. So let’s get on with it.’

Despite my obvious anxiety about the matter, we didn’t encounter any more warbands, emerging from the undercity on the outskirts of Havendown towards the end of the afternoon. Without the voxes in the Salamanders to relay a message, our comm-beads didn’t have anything like enough range to get through to the schola, so we ended up commandeering a truck from an understandably nervous PDF squad who’d been left to man a roadblock the previous day, and who’d received no new orders since Rytepat was destroyed. Under the circumstances I told them that they might as well stand down, and go to ground in preparation for the guerrilla stage of the war, which I was certain was about to start; perhaps that saved their lives, or perhaps not, but as I never saw any of them again, I have no idea how they fared.⁷⁵

The drive back was as uneventful as a trip with Jurgen at the wheel was ever likely to be, and as we approached Salubria Parva, and I caught my first glimpse of the schola standing proudly on the slopes above the rooftops of the village, I found myself beginning to hope that the worst was behind us. But in that, of course, I was woefully over-optimistic.

‘You took your time,’ Rorkins greeted me, as I entered the command post. I’d filled him in on the results of our attempt to rescue the Governor as soon as we’d got within vox range, so there was no need to go through it all again. Instead I shrugged, affecting nonchalance for the benefit of anyone who might be watching.

‘We ran into a little hitch,’ I said. ‘As I’ve already explained.’

‘Well, your friend the governor’s been making a lot of trouble for a dead man while you’ve been out enjoying the scenery,’ Rorkins said shortly.

‘You should have finished him off yourself while you had the chance.’

‘Excuse me?’ I asked, feeling the old, unpleasant sensation of events beginning to spiral out of control again. Julien glanced up from the other side of the hololith, and grinned at me sympathetically.

‘Things have moved on a bit since your last message,’ she said. That had been barely half an hour before, and I’d hurried straight to the command post as soon as Jurgen had parked the lorry we’d taken from the PDF troops. There had hardly been time for Varan to mount another major attack anywhere, but I couldn’t think of anything else that would have left Rorkins so obviously out of sorts. ‘This came in about five minutes ago.’ While I was still on my way up from the vehicle pool, in other words. That went some way towards explaining the colonel’s mood; the shock of whatever it was hadn’t had time to wear off yet.

‘What did?’ I asked, but even before I’d finished speaking, the Celestian had activated the hololith. Trevellyan’s face appeared, looking almost as gaunt as the last time I’d seen him, and I felt as though I’d been kicked hard in the stomach. Varan must have got a medicae to him in the nick of time, and there was only one reason why he would have bothered to do that.

Sure enough, when the Governor spoke, it was to confirm my worst fears. ‘Citizens of Perlia,’ he began, ‘I speak to all of you, in the hope of preventing further unnecessary bloodshed. The forces of liberation recently arrived on our world are not our enemies, despite the lies and propaganda you’ve been fed to foster that impression. They bring freedom to all of you willing to embrace it; freedom from the stifling rule of the Imperium, which crushes any flowering of individual talent under the dull grey mantle of conformity, and which ripped so many of our loved ones from our embrace to feed the insatiable maw of the tyrannid juggernaut. Lay down your arms, and welcome our new friends, so that together we can go forward into a new and more glorious age.’

‘Treasonous bastard,’ Rorkins said, his jaw clenching. Trevellyan was still mouthing off, and I gestured to Julien to cut the recording; I’d seen and heard more than enough.

‘That’s on every pict and vox-channel they can reach,’ she said. ‘Our tech-priest friends are jamming it wherever they can, of course, but it’s still getting through.’

‘Of course,’ I echoed, still trying to take in the magnitude of this reversal. ‘I’ll make a broadcast myself, denouncing him as a traitor. I’ve still got my

reputation as the Liberator to trade on; a lot of Perlans will respect that.' However hollow it was in actuality.

'Worth a try,' Rorkins said. 'Record something as soon as you can, and we'll get Visiter to transmit it from space. They're controlling most of the civilian vox and pict nets, but we should be able to bypass them with an orbital relay.'

'Better find that niece of his as well,' I added as an afterthought. 'Get her sworn in as the new Governor, and we'll undermine whatever's left of Trevellyan's authority.' Most Perlans would feel a sense of allegiance to the office, not the incumbent, so if we could mount a swift enough counter-coup with a plausible candidate of our own, we should be able to prevent a lot of them from going over to the enemy. I hoped.

'I've already got a shuttleful of storm-troopers on their way to her hunting lodge,' Rorkins said, nodding in agreement. 'She's at the arse end of nowhere, so we might as well leave her there for now. At least if Varan makes an attempt to grab her too, we'll have enough warning to do something about it.'

'Well, that's something,' I said, the palms of my hands suddenly beginning to itch as though I'd inadvertently brushed against Jorgen. For a moment the reason for this sudden rush of apprehension eluded me, and then the coin dropped. 'But we need to get the schola evacuated right away. If Trevellyan's told Varan he missed the real centre of resistance when he lanced Rytapat...'

'Strangely enough,' Rorkins said, with a slightly strained smile, 'you're not the only man around here able to draw the obvious conclusion. Visiter's people are inbound already, so you'd better get that pict made fast.'

'Luckily for us, the debris belt forced the enemy flotilla into a low polar orbit rather than a geostationary one over the capital,' Julien said. 'The warships won't be in position for an orbital strike on these co-ordinates for about an hour. More or less.'

'Then let's hope it's more,' I said, and hurried off to find Jorgen and a tech-priest capable of sorting out the pict recording. That took longer than I would have liked, of course, but I was pleased to see that the first phase of the evacuation was already going well as I emerged into the fading light of the main quadrangle, the youngest progeni marshalling under the nominal control of their instructors. All were carrying bedrolls and survival packs, which struck me as a little odd, and I was considerably surprised to see

Brasker helping to round them up, a similar bundle slung over his own shoulder.

‘Ah, commissar,’ he said, glancing in my direction. ‘Come to see us off?’

‘Not quite,’ I said, ‘I’m looking for a cogboy with a functioning pict recorder, but I’m pleased to see you’re getting to safety while there’s still time.’ To my vague astonishment, I found I meant it.

The bursar smiled affably, every inch the faintly absurd bureaucrat everyone else (apart, presumably, for Julien) still took him for, and shifted his burden in a vain attempt to carry it with some semblance of dignity.

‘I’m afraid that’s something of a relative term at the moment. But you’ll hardly want our younger charges getting underfoot in a battlezone, I’m sure.’ He had no idea of my reasons for choosing the Valley of Daemons for another last stand, of course, but he was astute enough to realise that wherever the bulk of our forces went, the enemy would be sure to follow.

I nodded, soberly. ‘I’m sure they’re in good hands,’ I said, and Brasker smiled wanly.

‘Apart from mine, you mean. I’ve always detested the outdoors, you know; it’s draughty, damp, and damnably untidy. But needs must, as they say.’ There could be no question of using our meagre stock of shuttles to evacuate the juvies by air. By the time they’d turned around and come back for the rest of us the schola could well be a hole in the ground, so Rorkins had fallen back on Visiter’s contingency plan. Those of us in any condition to fight would be airlifted to the Valley of Daemons as soon as the shuttles arrived, while the non-combatants hiked up into the mountains surrounding Salubria, hoping to go to ground there until the noise stopped.

Nowhere on the planet was particularly safe, of course, but we were hoping the enemy would have better things to do with their troopers than chase children through an inhospitable wilderness. Of course we might very well be wrong about that, the forces of Chaos are never exactly rational even at the best of times, but if we were, at least it would divert some of their resources from an assault on the Shadowlight.

‘The Emperor protects,’ I said, doing my job by reflex, and hurried off to try and convince the rest of the planet not to surrender in droves.

By the time I’d got that little chore out of the way, and an earnest enginseer had bustled away with the pict recording to transmit it to Visiter, things were getting tight for time, so I made my way back to the command centre again, Jurgen at my heels. Somehow he’d managed to find me a mug

of tanna, so I was feeling almost my old self again by the time I rejoined Julien and Rorkins.

Needless to say, my sense of revived wellbeing lasted just long enough for me to get a good look at the hololith, which was now showing an ominously detailed orbital track, counting down the time until Varan's flotilla was in a position to open fire on us. By my reckoning there could only be a handful of minutes to go, and I glanced nervously at the contact icons. There was still no sign of any incoming shuttles that I could see.

'The commodore's cutting it a bit fine,' I said, having expected the extraction to have begun some time ago.

Rorkins shrugged. 'The bulk of his fleet assets are hiding out in the halo,' he pointed out. 'Hardly somewhere he can just dispatch a shuttle from at the drop of a hat.'

'And they'll still have to get past the enemy,' Julien added.

'Then perhaps it might be prudent to follow the juvies,' I said. That would leave the Shadowlight undefended, of course, but that would hardly be my fault, and I certainly couldn't do anything to look after it if I'd been vaporised. Going to ground in the mountains, particularly with a crèche to look after, wouldn't be my idea of fun, but at least it would give us the chance to regroup.

Rorkins shook his head. 'Visiter says he's on top of it, and I trust him. We stay put.'

Technically, of course, I could simply have overruled him, but if we didn't all end up dead in the next ten minutes or so, the consequences of that would have been dire; the inevitable resentment and recrimination would fester, and our fragile resistance to the invader would be fatally weakened. So I just nodded, and stared at the hololith, waiting for the commodore to surprise us again.

Well, I have to admit, he certainly did that. After a tense wait, which probably lasted no more than a minute or two, but which felt like the best part of a week, my eye was caught by a rapidly moving blip at the edge of the display.

'Single contact, inbound from deep space,' the auspex operator reported, presumably in case the rest of us had suddenly been struck blind.

I looked at the icons surrounding it, assimilating the information rapidly. 'That's way too large for a shuttle,' I said. 'And it doesn't have a hope of braking in time to avoid burning up at that speed.' If anything, it was

approaching faster than the carrier ships that had been fried in the upper atmosphere during the first Chaos incursion, and I couldn't see how the pilot could possibly hope to survive re-entry, let alone get down to the surface in time to extract us.

'It's the *Trespassers William*,' the auspex operator told me helpfully, 'an ore freighter the commodore requisitioned.' Remembering the bulk transport that had carried Vorlens and his men to the asteroid, I found myself briefly wondering how the lieutenant was faring.⁷⁶

'Well they can't evacuate us in that,' I said. If it was anything like the vessel I'd seen before, it wasn't designed to land on a planet in any case.

'I don't think that's the idea,' Rorkins said mildly. For a moment I wondered what he meant, then the coin dropped at last. The ship was a missile, aimed squarely at the enemy flotilla. Even if it wasn't armed, its sheer mass and velocity would be enough to destroy any vessel it collided with, and Varan's flagship was right in its path.

The crews of the Chaos flotilla must have come to the same conclusion, as the formation began to drift apart, the ships comprising it scattering in a belated attempt at self-preservation. Presented with a rather more pressing target for their guns they began to open fire, but by now the *Trespassers William* was moving so fast that they barely had any chance at all of hitting it.

'Emperor on Earth,' Julien breathed, 'he's going to take out the *Undefeatable*!' For a moment, indeed, it seemed that she was right, but one of the lesser warships fired up its main drive in the nick of time, just managing to interpose itself. Both vessels disintegrated in a shower of debris, the largest pieces of which continued to register as blips in their own right. A collective sigh of disappointment swept round the command post.

'Well, it was worth a try,' Rorkins said. 'And at least they've missed their chance to take a shot at us.' With a sudden surge of relief I could see that he was right, the orbiting warships now being far too busy trying to avoid colliding with one another or the spreading debris cloud to have any attention to spare for anything as taxing as a precision ground strike. This time round, anyway. By the time they'd stabilised their orbits enough to bring their guns to bear on the site of the schola, the planet's rotation would have taken us out of reach. Of course they could swat us easily on the next pass, but we'd be long gone by then.

'Something's not quite right about that debris,' I said, staring at the

hololith. Though most of it was expanding more or less as you'd expect, one chunk appeared to be slowing, moving into a parabolic curve around the planet. I pointed it out. 'That's under power.' The itching in my palms, which had begun to die away, flared up anew as I extrapolated its course, and found it ended almost exactly at our position.

'IFF confirmed,' the auspex operator said, his voice breaking for a moment in his excitement.⁷⁷ 'It's one of ours.'

'Two orks with one bolt,' Rorkins said with satisfaction. He shrugged. 'Well, I suppose that's one way of getting a shuttle through the blockade without the enemy noticing.'

Which was what worried me, of course. I hadn't been expecting a fleet of the things, but I'd been counting on Visiter sending enough to evacuate us all before the enemy arrived, or blew us to pieces from space. If this was the only transport available, neither looked like being a particularly realistic hope. My thoughts began to take a gloomy turn, which was only intensified by Julien's next words.

'I've had a report from my novitiates,' she broke in. 'I sent a few out as scouts this morning, and they've just made contact. There's an armoured column moving along the Salubria road. ETA about twenty minutes.'

Once again, I felt the peculiar sensation of being kicked in the gut. 'Well,' I said, putting everyone's thoughts into words, 'it looks as though Varan's decided to do this the hard way after all.'



TWENTY

Having nothing more constructive to contribute in the command centre than standing around watching the contact icons of the shuttle and the enemy closing in on our position, and wondering which of them would get here first, I went outside to check on our state of readiness to resist an attack. At least the non-combatants had been cleared out of the way, which made things a bit easier; now we could engage the enemy freely, without worrying overmuch about collateral damage. We'd probably put a bit of a dent in the schola, of course, but that could be repaired once the dust had settled, and everyone left behind was old enough and sensible enough to keep their heads down, or so I hoped.

'We'll be ready for them, commissar,' Maklin promised, standing by the main gates with Frister and Dallory, staring into the distance through an amplivisor.

Stebbins was a few metres away, behind the gunnery shield of a sandbagged autocannon, making sure the ammunition belt was free of potentially fouling kinks, and gave an encouraging wave as he glanced up and saw me looking in his direction. 'We certainly will,' he agreed, his voice quietly conversational in my comm-bead.

'Any signs of movement?' I asked, and Dallory pointed towards the narrow access road winding down the mountainside to join the main highway to Salubria.

'Nothing yet,' he said. 'But we can hear them.' He was right, too, the growling of engines and the squealing of tracks echoing through the valley. Whoever the enemy were, they had AFVs with them, Chimeras by the sound of it. That didn't bode well. Perlian PDF models favoured multi-lasers as their primary armament, and a few of those would make short

work of our fortifications.

‘Then perhaps we ought to get the gates closed,’ I suggested, trying not to sound too eager.

‘That’s what we’re here for, sir,’ Frister reassured me. ‘Just as soon as the scouts get back.’ Of course. We could hardly leave Julien’s Sororitas novitiae outside the walls. I just hoped they’d get a move on.

‘I can see them now,’ Maklin said, the sudden burst of enthusiasm in his voice tipping me off as to who their leader might be even before the first silhouettes appeared, bounding towards us through the gathering dusk. For a moment my blood froze, the unmistakable bulk of the approaching power armour making me wonder if the Traitor Marines I’d glimpsed back in Havendown were spearheading the assault on the schola, then reason reasserted itself. This must be Julien’s novitiae, making the most of the enhanced speed and agility their power armour bestowed to facilitate their scouting expedition.⁷⁸ A moment later I saw that I was right, and relaxed a little, barely conscious of the fact that my hand was falling away from the butt of my laspistol again.

‘Commissar.’ As I’d surmised, Monyka was leading the group, which accounted for Maklin’s interest; he hovered nearby, trying to look both invisible and potentially useful, while Dallory and Frister closed the heavy gates, which thudded into place with a reassuringly solid sound. I’d been in far too many sieges to place much confidence in that, though, and listened to Monyka’s report with great avidity. ‘There are six Chimeras heading this way, with another four trucks behind them. No sign of any heavy weapons, though, apart from the ones on the APCs.’

‘Thank you, Monyka,’ I said, noting her pleased surprise that I’d remembered her name. ‘Perhaps you’d better report in detail to Sister Julien. I believe she’s waiting for you in the command centre.’

‘All right.’ A flicker of disappointment seemed to cross her face for a moment. ‘Promise you’ll save a few heretics for us?’

‘There’ll be more than enough to go round,’ I reassured her, glancing up at the bruise-blue sky, in which the first few stars and the faint band of the debris disc were beginning to become visible. One of the pinpoints of light appeared to be moving, and I permitted myself a brief moment of relief. The shuttle was on its final approach, and somehow, when it took off again, I was going to be aboard it. I had no idea how I was going to manage that without compromising my die-hard reputation, or how I’d be able to take

enough of our people with me to defend the Shadowlight, but I'd make the best of it, just like I always did. When I looked back the novitiate and her squad mates were already gone, Maklin gazing after them with a faintly abstracted air.

'Go and help Stebbins,' I told him, raising my voice slightly over the rising scream of the shuttle's engines. Their note was lower than I'd expected, and I looked up again, feeling a sudden surge of hope as I did so. Instead of the Aquila I'd anticipated, the vast bulk of a heavy cargo lifter, like the ones I'd seen in Orelus's hangar bay, was descending slowly towards the schola's shuttle pad. It was huge, comparable in size to the company drop-ships I'd ridden in so often during my time with the Imperial Guard, and I began to breathe a little more easily. We should be able to get all our effectives on board after all, although it was hardly going to be a comfortable ride.

'I'm pulling everyone off the inner perimeter,' Rorkins voxed me a moment later. 'The sooner we can start boarding the better.' I couldn't fault the logic of that, although by default, it seemed, I was going to be left holding the outer defences with just Jurgen and a handful of cadets. If Monyka's estimate of the enemy numbers was anywhere near accurate, that meant we'd be facing about a hundred men, maybe two full platoons, although there was no guarantee that they'd be in anything like so cohesive a formation. Not to mention the AFVs, which were going to be a real problem...

'I thought you might like another tanna, sir,' Jurgen said, appearing at my shoulder like a small, odiferous daemon in a village mystery play.

'You thought right,' I assured him, taking heart from his presence as I always did. 'It's getting a little chilly out here now.'

'I can't say I'd noticed, sir,' Jurgen said, producing a flask of the fragrant liquid, though, being an iceworlder, that was hardly surprising. A Valhallan's idea of sultry was frost on the windows. He handed me a cup of the beverage, restowed the flask somewhere in his collection of pouches, and unslung the melta.

'Well, it'll be warm enough around here in a minute,' I said, as the grinding of tracks grew louder outside the walls, audible even over the shrieking of the shuttle's engines, and we took refuge behind the nearest line of sandbags.

Jurgen shrugged. 'As the Emperor wills,' he said, phlegmatic as ever.

‘They’re deploying,’ Frister said, his voice sounding a little flat in my earpiece as he tried to suppress the surge of adrenaline no doubt slamming through his system. He was up on the walls with Dallory, peering through the amplivisor from the relative safety of the firing platform just below the crest, and I was pleased to note that they both kept their heads well down. No point in tempting a vigilant enemy to try for a shot. ‘Bailing out of the vehicles. Looks as though they’re planning to advance on foot behind the armour.’

‘Thank you, Frister,’ I said, trying to mask my own apprehension. I turned to Jurgen. ‘We’ll need to block the gate as soon as they breach it.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ he said, almost casually, and I nodded, opening a channel to the command centre.

‘How’s the embarkation coming?’ I asked.

‘About as well as you’d expect,’ Rorkins replied shortly.

Divining his meaning at once, I switched frequencies. ‘Kayla, Nelys, get over to the pad and maintain order,’ I said. ‘People and weapons get priority, anything else can wait. Tilar, Garvie, the command post. Assist the commander in removing or erasing any sensitive information.’ I waited for the chorus of assent to die away, and asked ‘Will that help?’

‘Greatly,’ Rorkins said, a faint edge of relief in his voice. ‘Anything we can do for you?’

‘Get some more bodies down here,’ I said. ‘We’re outnumbered about twenty to one, not counting the heavy kit.’ Those were odds I didn’t like the sound of at all, and I voxed the quartet of cadets with me on a secure net. ‘Our job here is just to delay the enemy,’ I cautioned them. ‘When I call the retreat, I’ll expect you to move as though Horus himself is after you, not frak around playing at heroes, or trying to pot just one more heretic before you leave. The shuttle won’t wait, and neither will I. Clear?’

‘Crystalline, commissar,’ Stebbins assured me, and the others mumbled their assent.

‘Good,’ I said, drawing my weapons, and feeling the tension knotting in the pit of my stomach. We were out of time for discussion, that much was obvious. A second or so later the solid ceramite of the gates began to shiver as the multi-lasers of the enemy Chimeras opened up, and the repeated thundercracks of their discharge echoed around the enclosed square. The acrid tang of ozone hung heavy in the air, ionised by the repeated bursts, and the armoured portal began to sag on its hinges.

‘They’ve got three Chimeras positioned where they can target the gates,’ Dallory reported, his voice in my comm-bead hazed by static from the burning air. ‘Firing in rotation.’ That wasn’t good. Solid as the gates were, and the walls surrounding them for that matter, they were never intended to stand up to that kind of battering.

I turned to Jurgen. ‘Any moment now,’ I said, and my aide nodded, lining up his melta on the collapsing gate. It was glowing a deep ackenberry red by this time, the diamond hard composite softening like caramel, and the end must surely come soon.

‘First one’s moving!’ Frister voxed, an instant before the weakened gate buckled on its hinges, rammed from the other side. It still held, though, and an engine revved, backing up; then the pitch increased again, and the portal shivered. Cracks appeared in the thick stone posts, and blocks of masonry tumbled from the archway above, dislodged by the impact.

‘Look out!’ I called, but Frister and Dallory were already moving, retreating further along the wall to a safer position. The third time was the charm: the abused gates burst from their hinges, crashing to the cobbles of the courtyard, and the first Chimera nosed through the gap, crushing them under its treads, its turreted multi-laser turning to look for a target. Its forward-mounted secondary weapon traversed too, the blunt nose of an autocannon seeming to point right at me for a heart-stopping instant.

‘That’s far enough,’ Jurgen said, and squeezed the trigger of his melta. Knowing what to expect, I closed my eyes at the critical instant, seeing a bright flare beyond the lids, and blinked them clear again, faint afterimages still dancing on my retina.

‘Good shot,’ I said. He’d taken the nearest track as neat as you please, and the Chimera had swerved as it shredded, jamming itself all but irremovably in the gateway. Only a narrow gap remained, barely sufficient for one or two men to get through at a time, and I began to hope we could hold them after all, but the Chimera’s heavy weapons were still in play. The hull-mounted autocannon didn’t have much to shoot at any more, praise the Emperor, but the turret could still traverse, and seemed intent on repaying us in kind for the hurt we’d inflicted on it.

‘Move!’ I told Jurgen, and we started running for a fresh line of sandbags, an instant before the emplacement we’d been sheltering in erupted in smoke and vapour. There was no time to pause while Jurgen lined up another shot, we’d have been toasted for sure before he managed to get a bead on the

turret, and we both dived over the lip of the makeshift fortification an instant before another blast of coherent light scythed over our heads, close enough to scorch the hessian sacks. The acrid odour of smouldering fabric tickled my nostrils as I hunkered down, waiting for the next one.

‘We’re on it,’ Frister said, and I risked a brief glance upwards. He and Dallory were running along the top of the wall, their greatcoats billowing like storm clouds against the more diffuse darkness of the night sky; perhaps that saved their lives, as the heretics outside found them difficult to target, although a few of the more vigilant ones sent a flurry of las-bolts bursting around them. A second later they’d jumped, landing on top of the wedged Chimera with an audible *clang!* of boot-heels against metal, and the heretic vehicle commander made the classic mistake of popping the hatch to see what was going on. Dallory shot him with his laspistol the moment he emerged, sending him slumping back inside, and a split second later Frister dropped a grenade down the open hatch.

‘Fire in the hole!’ he bellowed, and the two cadets jumped, hitting the ground almost at the same instant the frag charge went off. The Chimera’s turret stopped moving, and they trotted over to join Jurgen and I, grinning like squaddies on their first R&R who’ve just discovered what joygirls are for.

‘That was reckless, irresponsible, and very well done,’ I told them, as they hopped over the sandbags and peered hopefully at the gate, no doubt itching for more heretics to bag. ‘But you got lucky. What do you think you’d have done if that idiot hadn’t opened the hatch for you?’

‘Used these,’ Frister said, pulling a couple of krak grenades from his pocket. ‘Jammed them under the barrel and run for it.’

‘You’re always telling us to have a backup plan,’ Dallory added. That was true, and I couldn’t really bring myself to chide them for saving my neck, so I simply nodded.

‘Commendably resourceful,’ I said. ‘Hang on to those, you may need them.’ I could see movement around the back of the wrecked Chimera, a trooper in the uniform of the Perlian PDF peering cautiously into the courtyard, no doubt having drawn the short straw, or hacked off his sergeant in some way, to earn the privilege of going first.

‘He’s Perlian,’ Maklin reported, the amplivisor to his eyes again. ‘But I can’t make out the unit insignia. They’ve been scribbled over with some sort of cartwheel design.’

Which told me all I needed to know. Clearly the guards at the Governor's palace hadn't been the only ones to turn their coats, although how widespread the mutiny had become, I had no way of telling. If I remembered rightly, however, the serial numbers on the wrecked Chimera identified it as belonging to one of the Havendown companies, which made sense; there were no other garrisons nearby that could have dispatched them so quickly.

'Hold your fire,' I told everyone. 'Let them commit. We'll only get the advantage of surprise once.' The turncoat trooper took another cautious step or two, glancing around the courtyard as warily as a sump-rat emerging from its burrow, manifestly astonished not to have been gunned down yet. A moment later he looked behind him and beckoned, relaxing a little, evidently prepared to believe that any further resistance had been effectively suppressed.

'We're almost finished boarding,' Kayla voxed, as a few more figures began to round the end of the crippled AFV. 'Can you give us another few minutes before pulling back?'

'We'll do our best,' I replied, as quietly as I could, not wanting to give the enemy troopers any warning that we were lurking in ambush. More of them were on the move, now, slipping past the disabled Chimera, and spreading out, their guns held ready for use in an instant. The first squad was followed by another, their green and grey battledress marking them out as Madasans, in contrast to the Perlian khaki,⁷⁹ and I frowned at the implications of that. However deranged Varan was, it seemed, he was able to integrate any fresh defectors into his armies as effectively as though they'd been through basic training together. That was a trick a good number of Imperial commanders I'd known would have cheerfully sold their souls to acquire, although, from what I'd seen of the way the Powers worked, I had no doubt that that would have been the least of the price Varan had paid.

After a moment I judged that the time was right to strike; a few more enemy troopers in the bag would have been a welcome bonus, but if we waited any longer they'd be too spread out to be sure of, so I gave the word of command.

'Fire!' I shouted, and Stebbins opened up with the autocannon, no doubt hugely delighted to have finally found a weapon even he couldn't miss the target with, scything down the front row of enemy troopers before they had a chance to react. Jurgen, the other cadets and I opened up too, my aide

eschewing the melta for the nonce in favour of his lasgun, taking full advantage of the wider spread it afforded. Caught between the SAW⁸⁰ and the blizzard of las-bolts most of them went down very nicely, only a couple surviving to run for cover, from where they returned fire without any noticeable effect. 'Cover the gateway.'

'Doing our best, sir,' Maklin assured me. The autocannon went quiet for a moment while he replaced the ammunition belt, then opened up again, just in time to force another traitor trooper to duck back behind the hull of the Chimera. Two or three other troopers hovered behind him, and another couple, a bit quicker off the mark, were already sprinting for the dubious cover afforded by the smoking ruin of the pile of sandbags Jurgen and I had abandoned a few moments before. One went down, felled by our lasweapons, but his squad mate made it to safety, and began adding a little more to the hail of las-bolts aimed in our general direction.

I started running the numbers in my head, not liking any of the conclusions I came to. The choke point we'd created was slowing them down, but unlike the usual Chaotic hordes I'd faced, the enemy wasn't about to charge obligingly down the barrels of our guns, dying in droves in the process. Instead, they continued to act like trained and motivated troopers, content to wait for an opportunity to advance, laying down suppressive fire as they did so, and taking full advantage of whatever cover was available. On the other hand, they seemed just as fanatical as the acolytes of the Ruinous Powers always did, indifferent to their own losses, and willing to take chances with their lives even Imperial storm-troopers would probably baulk at.

The worst of both worlds, in other words; I had no doubt that they'd continue to slip past the wreck in ones and twos, every time we paused to reload, until they had the weight of numbers on their side, and that if we tried to disengage before then, they'd just rush us before we'd gone a dozen metres. The thought of running for the shuttle with a horde of murderous fanatics at my heels, shooting as they came, was far from a pleasant one, I can assure you.

At that moment, Maklin and Stebbins stopped firing, and I glanced across at the autocannon emplacement. Maklin was working the feed mechanism frantically, trying to clear a jam, and a sudden hail of las-rounds against the metal shield protecting him and Stebbins told me that the enemy were about to take full advantage of the lull.

'It's no good, it's overheated,' Stebbins said, starting to draw his laspistol.

‘Then I’ll cool it!’ Maklin said, practically shoving his fellow cadet back into the gunner’s seat, and beginning to fumble with his trousers. ‘Keep firing!’ A moment later a cloud of rank-smelling steam told me that he’d picked up an old gunner’s trick for cooling a weapon in an emergency, from Emperor knew where, and I found myself thanking the Throne that all our tech-priests were currently filing aboard the cargo ship, rather than being anywhere they could have witnessed so profane a desecration of the Omnissiah’s bounty. We’d never have heard the last of it. ‘Try it now!’

Stebbins squeezed the trigger again, and, to everyone’s relief except the enemy’s, the autocannon burst into life once more. By this point the damage had been done, however, almost a dozen of the turncoats making it through the gap despite the best efforts of the rest of us and, of course, the more of them who joined the fray, the more time we spent ducking behind our improvised ramparts, dodging the return fire, which allowed still more of their comrades to join them. Maklin’s success in getting the autocannon working again had stemmed the tide, but only briefly; at the rate Stebbins was burning ammunition it could only be a matter of time before it seized up again, or they simply ran dry, and then the heretics would be on us like Jurgen’s psoriasis.

Glancing round for a line of retreat, I noticed the deep cracks in the masonry around the gateway again, and the germ of an idea began to take root. It was a slender chance, I thought, but then I’d hazarded my life on a lot slimmer before now, and I was still breathing; as I’ve remarked on more than one occasion, even the narrowest of margins is better than no chance at all. I gestured to Jurgen. ‘The archway,’ I said. ‘Can you do anything about it from here?’

Divining my meaning at once, my aide nodded. ‘Piece of cake,’ he assured me, abandoning the lasgun for the melta once again. His aim was as sure as always, the ravening burst of thermal energy impacting on the crumbling masonry above the abandoned Chimera, and a large block of stone teetered, before crashing to the ground, crushing another of the traitors who’d ducked back behind it to wait out the storm of autocannon rounds spanging off the abused armour plate. Expelling his breath in a sigh of frustration, Jurgen steadied his aim again, but before he could fire Frister and Dallory had flung their remaining krak grenades at the gateway: the anti-armour charges exploded with a satisfying roar, which was drowned out almost at once by the thunder of toppling stone.

‘That’s plugged the gap,’ Dallory said, an unmistakable note of satisfaction in his voice, just as Kayla voxed again.

‘Almost everyone’s aboard, commissar,’ she reported, sounding a little frazzled, but that was no more than I’d expected. When I spoke to her later, it seemed that a few of the tech-priests had got a little difficult about having to leave some cherished items of junk behind to fit everybody in, which Nelys had finally sorted out by asking which of them was offering to stay behind to make room for it. The lad was definitely coming on.

‘We’ll be right there,’ I told her, privately wondering just how we were going to manage that without being overrun by the heretics already inside the walls, not to mention the dozens of others no doubt preparing at that moment to scramble up the pile of rubble we’d just thoughtfully provided for them to climb. I turned my attention to the others. ‘Pull back, by fire and movement. Stebbins and Maklin go first.’ No point in finding any hidden sharpshooters for myself.

The two cadets abandoned the autocannon, and scuttled for the safety of a buttress holding up one of the proctor’s lodges, while the rest of us laid down what covering fire we could. By a miracle they made it, although the next stage would be even trickier; two laspistols could hardly be expected to suppress over a dozen armed, and by now probably very hacked-off, heretics with any degree of success. If we kept as low as we could, taking full advantage of the sandbags, we might just make it as far as one of the outbuildings, though, and hope we could find refuge there. Of course it was pretty obvious where we’d be heading for, so all the enemy had to do was take aim at the two points the sandbags ended and wait, but there was nothing we could do about that except hope that Stebbins and Maklin could keep their heads down long enough for Jurgen to get a quick shot off with the melta.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve got any of those frag grenades left?’ I asked hopefully, and Dallory shook his head.

‘Fraid not, sir,’ he said regretfully. I poked my head above the sandbags as much as I dared (which wasn’t much, believe me), and ducked back at once as puffs of vaporised hessian and kicked up dirt erupted around my position. This didn’t look good, but there seemed no alternative to making a dash for it, putting my trust in Stebbins’ dubious marksmanship, my battered set of carapace, and whatever attention the Emperor could spare from keeping the galaxy turning, which I didn’t expect to be much.

‘Need a hand there, Cain?’ a familiar voice asked, and Julien trotted into the courtyard, her power armour gleaming like freshly-shed blood, her bolt pistol and chainsword already in her hands. Behind her came the troop of novitiates, bolters cradled, sinister highlights dancing along the edges of the sarissas locked to their barrels.⁸¹

‘I wouldn’t object to one,’ I told her, never having been so pleased to see a gaggle of Sororitas in my life. The heretics opened up as soon as they saw them, of course, their las-rounds expending themselves harmlessly against the crimson ceramite of Julien’s armour, and the freshly-painted white of her charges. With ear-splitting shrieks of ‘For the Throne!’ the novitiates bounded into the attack, tearing apart troopers and the cover they hid behind with a hail of bolter fire, slashing at the demoralised survivors with their sarissas, and generally wreaking a most satisfying amount of carnage.

Leaving the novitiates to enjoy themselves, we hurried through the strangely-deserted schola, its courtyards and quadrangles seeming eerie and lifeless. Only then did it occur to me that I’d never seen them anything other than bustling, in all the time I’d spent here. Despite the sense of urgency, and the buzzing of adrenaline in my veins, I found the prospect curiously melancholy, like seeing an old friend in the sanatorium for what you both know is liable to be the last time, and I found myself trying to take in as many little details of the closest thing I’d ever known to a home as I could.

The sounds of battle had long since faded behind us as we reached the shuttle pad, and I glanced up at the huge cargo hauler, hardly surprised at all to see a familiar shock of ruddy hair through the visor of the cockpit. Glancing down, Sprie waved a cheerful greeting, and returned his attention to his instruments.

‘Hurry up, commissar! No time for sightseeing!’ Julien’s voice was in my comm-bead again, and I turned, catching sight of her in the distance, flanked by her novitiates, whose white, blood-spattered armour made them look like vengeful ghosts in the half-light. None of them seemed to be missing, I noted with relief; we’d already suffered more than enough casualties, and when we arrived at our destination we’d need all the warriors we could muster. They were catching up fast, their augmented muscles allowing them to maintain a pace which would have had the cadets and I dropping with exhaustion by now, and their metal-shod feet clattered on the boarding ramp almost simultaneously with ours. ‘We gave them a

bloody nose back there, but they'll regroup in short order, and then they'll be all over us.'

'They won't have time,' I said, with heartfelt relief, as the ramp began to rise behind us. The cargo hold was just as crowded as I'd feared, and I resolved at once to go and annoy Sprie on the flight deck at the earliest opportunity. I glanced back through the narrowing gap, seeing a flicker of movement in the distance, which could possibly have been running men, but the thick metal slab thudded into place before I could be sure. A moment later the unmistakable surge of acceleration beneath my feet, and the familiar expression of nausea on the face of my aide, informed me that we were airborne. 'Thank you for your assistance, by the way. It was most timely.'

'My pleasure,' Julien said, with every sign of sincerity. Then she smiled, a trifle grimly. 'It gave the novitiates an easy bleeding, which was probably no bad thing.' She glanced at Monyka and Maklin, who were grinning at each other inanely, and lowered her voice a little, although between the babbling of overlapping conversations around us and the roaring of the shuttle's engines the danger of being overheard was minimal. 'I've no doubt the next battle we face won't be anything like as easy.'

In that, of course, she was perfectly correct, although I couldn't even begin to tell her quite how desperate things were about to become. When Varan became aware of the location of the Shadowlight, we'd no longer be fighting to save a world: the fate of the entire galaxy would be hanging in the balance, and I was by no means sure we'd be able to tip it in the right direction with the limited resources at our disposal.



Editorial Note:

As will no doubt be obvious to most attentive readers, by this point the situation across the face of Perlia was confused to say the least. As Cain barely bothers to acknowledge the fact, I've appended another brief extract from a popular account, which, though far from comprehensive, at least touches on most of the salient points with commendable brevity.

From The Return of the Liberator: Ciaphas Cain and the Second Siege of Perlia by Orten Bassit, 037. M42.

Though Commissar Cain had been far from idle, rallying resistance to the detestable foe with single-minded diligence, unrest and sedition continued to erupt sporadically across the face of Perlia. The Liberator's pictcasts, relayed from space by his heroic compatriots in the SDF, did much to calm the situation, which would undoubtedly have been far worse after the unmasking of Governor Trevellyan as a secret worshipper of the Dark Powers, stiffening the resolve of those determined to defend the planet from the Great Enemy whatever the cost. The decisive actions of Illyria Trevellyan, the newly-appointed incumbent of the office, who had been hastily sworn in to replace her treacherous uncle, also boosted morale among the loyalists, her own pictcasts denouncing the turncoats and fainthearts doing at least as much damage to their cause as the hunting rifle she lost no time in turning on the traitors who had dared to attack her vacation lodge.⁸²

As a result, although pockets of subversion continued to flare up, almost randomly, across the planet, usually in towns already held by the invaders,

only a small proportion of the PDF heeded the call to surrender; most, instead, followed the example of their predecessors during the greenskin invasion and scattered, commencing guerrilla strikes against the occupiers without recourse to any higher authority. In this they were greatly assisted by the newly-inducted members of the PDV, who, as civilians in all but name, were able to blend into the general populace far more easily, striking and vanishing again almost at will, creating disruption out of all proportion to their limited numbers.

The sole exception was in and around Havendown, where the taint of Chaotic corruption spread unbelievably fast, ensnaring most of the PDF units within the vicinity of the capital, who, to a man, began to swear unyielding fealty to Varan. Even the near destruction of his flagship, in a strike of breathtaking audacity by the SDF, failed to shake their faith in this supposedly invincible leader; and so the stage was set for the final confrontation between the embodiment of all that was foul, in the shape of the invading warmaster, and the incarnate compendium of the finest human virtues represented by Ciaphas Cain.

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TWENTY-ONE

The flight to the Valley of Daemons was a remarkably short one, or so it seemed to me, although that may have been due at least in part to my foreknowledge of the fate that almost certainly awaited us there. I diverted myself from these morbid reflections as much as I could by conversing with Sprie, as the laden cargo shuttle rolled back the night, hurtling eastwards through almost half a day's worth of time zones, so that by the time we'd arrived at our destination the sun had shuffled back from the dusk of early evening to a point a little past noon.

The young pilot had greeted me cheerfully enough as I entered the flight deck, while the rest of his crew, a couple of naval cadets I didn't recognise, and who he didn't bother to introduce, busied themselves at their control lecterns. I had no idea what they were doing, but, assuming that it somehow involved getting us to our destination in one piece, determined not to bother them unnecessarily.

'I wasn't sure you were going to make it down in one piece,' I admitted to Sprie, and the young man grinned happily.

'To be honest, it was touch and go there for a moment,' he admitted cheerfully. 'But I managed it.'

'Only just,' one of the other cadets muttered resentfully, and Sprie's smile spread.

'We were well within hull tolerance.' He shrugged. 'Well, maybe a bit over the safety margins, but this old tub's as solid as a bulkhead, and I didn't want to give the enemy a decent crack at us on the way through.'

'From what I saw in the tactical displays,' I said, 'they had more than enough to think about at the time.'

'That was the commodore's idea,' Sprie told me, to my distinct lack of

surprise. ‘He’d been hoping to use the freighter as a Q ship,⁸³ but we didn’t have enough munitions to fit it out, so he hit on the idea of a high-speed ram instead. We just hung on to one of the external docking ports, and disengaged at the last second, hoping they’d take us for a bit of debris until after we hit the atmosphere.’

‘Well, it worked,’ I said. ‘Well done.’ Then another thought struck me. ‘What about the ship’s crew? It wasn’t a suicide run, was it?’

‘Almost,’ Sprie said, as cheerful as ever. ‘The three of us volunteered to man the flight stations on the bridge, and just ran for the shuttle as soon as we’d locked off the helm.’ I looked at the pair of cadets accompanying him with renewed respect. They’d put their lives on the line more than once today, it seemed. ‘The tech-priests left us a couple of servitors to handle things down in the engine room, so we didn’t have to wait for anyone else, which was just as well; it would have been a lot further to run, and I doubt they’d have made it.’

‘You’re all a credit to the Navy,’ I said, sincerely enough, and settled into a vacant seat to try and grab a little sleep before we arrived at our destination.

I woke shortly before we reached it, which was useful; I’d never seen the valley from the air before, and found the unaccustomed view extremely helpful in settling the tactical picture more comfortably in my mind. The air was clear, with a faint haze of cloud, and the water in the lake shimmered like silver in the afternoon sun, reminding me for some reason of the scales of a recently-caught fish. The deep scar in the earth below the dam was as desolate as ever, and, to my relief, still devoid of any Chaotic forces, although how long that was likely to last I had no idea.

‘Put us down near the building,’ I said, spotting the scorched area where our car had so recently burned. To my distinct lack of surprise, red-uniformed skitarii were already fanning out across the piazza, and I reached for the handset of the vox on the console next to the pilot’s station. There was no telling what deadly surprises the Adeptus Mechanicus may have rigged to defend the shrine against an air attack, and I didn’t want to find out the hard way. ‘Yaitz, it’s Commissar Cain. I’ve brought a few friends, as I promised.’ I glanced at Sprie as I spoke, but if he was surprised at my words, he never showed it, simply guiding us to the ground with his usual precision.

‘Acknowledged, commissar,’ Yaitz responded after a moment, but through the armourcrys I could see that none of the troopers were standing down.

Not that I would in their place either, though, I have to admit. Sprie cut the engines, and I stood, ready to lead the way down the descending cargo ramp.

As my boots hit the tiles making up the mosaic, and my face came fully into view from the shadows, the skitarii surrounding us finally relaxed a little, settling their hellguns more comfortably into the crooks of their arms instead of holding them ready for use, and I felt a little of the tension draining out of me in response. I'd hardly have been the first commissar to be felled by friendly fire, but it would have been an ironic way to finish my career, particularly under the circumstances. After a moment Yaitz hurried forwards, and I nodded a quick greeting, before turning to indicate the motley collection of cadets and instructors disembarking behind me.

'Captain Yaitz, commanding the skitarii detachment here,' I said blandly, letting the others worry about the reason for the presence of armed guards in a supposedly harmless Mechanicus shrine if they cared to. With any luck they'd just assume Yaitz and his men had been assigned here as a result of the invasion, and not think too hard about it, although Rorkins was probably astute enough to suspect a hidden agenda. On the other hand, he had more than enough to worry about at the moment, without adding any more problems to the list. I turned, flapping my hand between the two men in the conventional gesture of hurried introduction. 'Commander Rorkins, C in C of the planetary defence effort.'

'Sir.' Yaitz had the good grace to salute, although, as a vassal of the Adeptus Mechanicus, he was no more under Rorkins's authority than I was. 'It's an honour. We heard you'd been killed in the orbital bombardment.'

'Then you heard wrong,' Rorkins said, softening the words with a smile. 'But we seem to have kept the enemy guessing.'

'So long as they don't guess you've come here,' Yaitz said. 'That would make us a very tempting target indeed.' Very neatly done, I thought, my own skill at misdirection enabling me to appreciate how subtly the skitarii captain had planted the idea that Rorkins's presence alone might attract enemy attention. That would explain the attack we both expected before too long to most people's satisfaction, without compromising the secret hidden beneath the shrine. He gestured to a nearby skitarii. 'Go with the commander, and see that he has everything he needs.' He turned back to Rorkins. 'I take it you'll need somewhere to set up your headquarters

again?’

‘That would be more than helpful,’ Rorkins said, leading his gaggle of staffers away in the wake of the red uniform. My own cadets, I noted with quiet approval, had taken it upon themselves to organise the disembarkation of most of the people we’d brought, marshalling them into groups and checking that everyone was adequately armed; apart from the engineers who’d accompanied us, who were simply gawking at the shrine and the dam beyond like skavvies from the sump getting their first glimpse of an uphive trading post. But then, the first time I’d been here, Felicia had been equally awestruck, telling me that the shrine was considered one of the Ommissiah’s greatest marvels on Perlia, studied at Mechanicus seminaries around the globe, and that precious few Perlian tech-priests ever got the chance to see its wonders for themselves, so I supposed I shouldn’t be too hard on them.

The unmistakable ringing of armoured feet on the metal mesh of the boarding ramp informed me, without turning round, that Julien and her novitiates were disembarking, and the expressions on the faces of the skitarii surrounding us hardened, becoming distinctly less welcoming. Well, I could hardly blame them for that: the last time battle-sisters had set foot on the premises they’d been working for Killian, slaughtering everyone apart from the renegade inquisitor’s own agents among the staff, and stealing the Shadowlight on his behalf.

‘May I present Sister Julien and her novitiates,’ I said smoothly, determined to prevent any lingering awkwardness from hampering our efforts to co-operate. If the Celestian noticed any hesitation in Yaitz’s manner she affected ignorance, simply greeting him with the sign of the aquila. After a moment Yaitz responded, fanning his fingers in the cogwheel gesture favoured by acolytes of the Ommissiah. ‘I’m sure we’ll find her assistance invaluable in keeping this installation safe,’ I added.

‘No doubt,’ Yaitz said neutrally. Any remaining uneasiness was swiftly dispelled, however, as Makan appeared, the sleeve of his jacket somewhat unconvincingly embellished with a PVF armband (which I suppose was intended to account for the bolt pistol holstered at his waist, if any of our party cared to ask.) ‘Sieur Makan here is our liaison with the Chilinvale militia.’ Julien nodded a cursory greeting.

‘We can have them here any time they’re needed,’ Makan told me, his tone adding that he doubted we’d ever be that desperate without having to put

the thought into words. Then, as though belatedly remembering the role he was supposed to be playing, he glanced towards the shrine. 'Magos Tayber sent me out here to ask if you could meet her whenever it's convenient.'

Meaning now, obviously; if whatever Felicia wanted was too sensitive to risk voxing me about, it was probably a matter of life and death.

'I'll be right there,' I said, trying to ignore the sudden flare of apprehension twisting my gut.

'Oh, there you are,' Felicia greeted me, as I descended the hidden staircase to the warren beneath the shrine. 'You're just in time.' Although she was trying to seem calm and unemotional, as befitted her status in the Mechanicus hierarchy, I knew her too well to be completely fooled; her intonation and body language were almost the same as they'd been on the day she'd discovered an abandoned power lifter at an ammunition cache in the desert, shortly after our journey across the continent had begun, barely able to contain her eagerness to start playing with her new toy.

'In time for what?' I asked, following her down the corridor at something approaching a trot. Makan was still with us, and with a thrill of renewed apprehension I began to realise we were approaching the chamber that held the Shadowlight.

'We think we've made a bit of a breakthrough,' Felicia told me. 'Sister Rosetta noticed that a couple of fragments of text which we thought belonged on separate slates appeared to relate to one another. If she's right, we might just have found a configuration of the spheres we can use.'

'Use to do what?' I asked, fighting the impulse to turn and run for the shuttle. If they were really planning to mess about with the enigmatic device, I wanted to be as far away as possible, preferably in the next segmentum, not offered a ringside seat.

'That's just it,' Felicia said. 'We're not entirely sure. But we're reasonably certain that it varies the amount of warp energy the Shadowlight channels into the main device.'

'Meaning what?' I asked, already regretting leaving Jurgen behind to sort out the matter of finding us a comfortable billet. The staff accommodation at the hydro station wasn't exactly commodious to begin with, not to mention having been designed with tech-priests in mind, which meant it was distinctly light on the essential amenities, and the sudden influx of people from the schola had the meagre facilities bursting at the seams.

Under most circumstances my aide would still have been able to procure me somewhere at least tolerable to sleep, but right now that seemed far less urgent than it had done when we got off the shuttle.

I activated my comm-bead. 'Jurgen, get down here at once,' I instructed, feeling a flicker of relief as he responded. If my fears turned out to be grounded, which they all too frequently were, his peculiar talent might be the only thing standing between us and disaster.

'Meaning we might be able to shut it down,' Felicia said. 'Or at least reduce its signature in the warp. This installation's well shielded, but if Varan's got enough powerful psykers with him, they might still be able to detect it if they get close enough.'

Not just them, either, I thought, although I kept my paranoia to myself. Felicia had never even heard of the necrons, and I still didn't have any real evidence that they were up and about, hunting for the Shadowlight too, so I wasn't about to mention that terrifying possibility to anyone else.

'That would be good,' I admitted cautiously, still feeling that it would be even better to leave the blasted thing alone, or just bury it again and forget about it altogether for preference. But these people had been studying the strange xenos artefact for decades, and presumably wouldn't take too many chances with it, all too aware of what they might be meddling with. On the other hand, Makan clearly shared my unease, his hand hovering over the butt of his bolt pistol in the manner of a man prepared to draw and use it in a heartbeat. Only then did I realise that my fingertips were resting lightly on my own weapons too.

We bustled into the Shadowlight chamber, which still seemed charged with unnatural energies to me, as though the malevolent power it contained was somehow leaking out into the very air, and the Inquisition agent and I exchanged apprehensive glances. There was no one else here, which was something, I supposed. At least we'd be the only casualties if Felicia's guess about what she was supposed to do turned out to be wrong.

'Now, let's see,' she said cheerfully, approaching the dais, and reaching out with all three of her mechadendrites. 'That one there, this one here...' She plucked the three spheres from their resting places, and repositioned them, stepping back to admire her handiwork with a quizzically cocked head. 'That ought to do it.'

Makan and I both exhaled, unaware until then that we'd been holding our breath. We were still here, and presumably so was the rest of the galaxy.

The ripples of light and colour chasing around the plinth stabilised into a fresh configuration, then began to move randomly, darkening, as though someone had just poured ink into an agitated fish tank.

‘That’s not right,’ Felicia said, sounding no more than mildly curious.

‘Get back!’ I had both my weapons drawn by this time, and only Makan’s solid bulk in the way prevented me from retreating towards the door. He’d drawn his bolt pistol too, although neither of us had anything to fire at yet. I had the distinct impression that if Felicia hadn’t been standing in the way he’d have taken a speculative pot shot at the Shadowlight on general principle.

‘In a minute,’ Felicia said, her voice still curiously abstracted. ‘I need to think about this...’

‘Just put the damn balls back the way they were!’ Makan said, looking as though he was on the verge of stepping forward and doing the job himself. Remembering the effect the Shadowlight had on unprotected flesh, I felt that would probably be a very bad idea, and reached out the hand holding my laspistol to forestall him.

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘Something’s happening.’ I wasn’t sure at first if I was imagining it or not, but the three blue spheres seemed to be trembling in their cradles, barely perceptibly; then, as I stared at them, the oscillations increased. ‘Emperor’s bowels!’ Abruptly the balls began to levitate, rising above the crystalline surface into which they’d been slotted, and orbiting around the blank obsidian bulk of the Shadowlight.

‘Most intriguing,’ Felicia agreed. ‘It’s never done that before.’

‘Out! Now!’ I said, suddenly aware that, with a gun and a chainsword in my hands, I was in no position to hustle her into motion. Fortunately Makan was quick on the uptake, seizing her upper arm with his free hand, and tugging her towards the door.

‘Stop it, you silly man,’ Felicia said, fending him off with the mechadendrites. ‘I need to observe this without any distractions.’ Her voice became a little uncertain. ‘That’s the only way we’ll understand what’s going on.’

‘I think I already do,’ I said, a thrill of sheer terror coursing through me along with the realisation. The air was rippling, seeming to curdle into something solid, although I could still see the tablets on the wall beyond the area of disturbance. Abruptly it ripped, like a sheet of fabric, and something emerged through the gap, clawed feet gouging furrows in the floor as it

shrugged free of the shroud of rippling air.

‘What in the Emperor’s name is that?’ Felicia shouted, forgetting all about detached observation for the time being, which was probably just as well. Baleful eyes glared at us from a face which seemed to be inside out where it wasn’t covered in needle-sharp quills, and I squeezed off a couple of las-bolts in the thing’s general direction, which didn’t seem to bother it at all.

‘It’s a daemon,’ I yelled back, ‘what the frak do you think it is?’ Fortunately a minor one, if I was any judge, having encountered rather more denizens of the warp than I would have liked over the years, but I was still well aware that it was perfectly capable of killing all three of us without any effort at all. And the tear in the fabric of reality was still hanging in the air behind it, bathing the thing in warp energy, so there was no hope of driving it back to the immaterium simply by inflicting physical damage on it, or waiting for it to destabilise in the usual manner of its kind.

‘A dead one,’ Makan said, emptying his clip at it. The explosive bolts detonated, gouging craters of flesh, or something like it, wherever they hit, and the daemon staggered. For a moment I dared to hope that it had been felled after all, but then it straightened, and bellowed something which no human larynx could ever have reproduced, words which echoed like razor-edged ice shards in my mind. Then, even more shockingly, it laughed, great barks of malign amusement, as its sundered flesh knitted seamlessly together.

‘Get her out of here!’ I said, all too aware that Makan was still blocking my path to the door, and that if I tried to push past him the thing would be on us in a heartbeat while we were distracted. Of course he thought I was being noble and heroic, my reputation for gallantry working to my advantage as it so often did, and to my relief he complied, dragging the no longer protesting tech-priest to safety.

As soon as the doorway was clear I started to follow, but the daemon had other ideas; with a bellow of thwarted rage it leapt to forestall me, swiping at my head with taloned hands. I ducked by reflex, parrying with the chainsword, and the whining teeth bit deep, drawing something that looked vaguely like blood, and smelled a great deal worse. As I’d expected the wound began to knit together instantly, so that within a heartbeat or two there was no trace remaining of the hurt I’d inflicted. I whirled, striking deep into its belly and driving it back a pace, though it rallied almost at once, aiming a flurry of blows which drove me back, but cost it a tracery of

momentarily oozing wounds on its forearms as I continued to parry.

With a sudden thrill of horror I realised I was backing straight towards the hole in reality. I had no idea whether I could fall through it into the warp beyond, and had no intention of finding out. I dived to one side, rolling past the abomination's legs, and taking an opportunistic swipe at it in passing. Once again my blade bit deep, and the daemon stumbled, turning awkwardly to follow me. I cracked off a couple of shots from the laspistol in my other hand as I rose to my feet, and to my immeasurable relief I noticed that the las-bolt wounds seemed to be taking a little longer to heal than before.

That could only mean one thing. Sure enough, a familiar odour was wafting through the door, followed an instant later by an equally familiar voice.

'Hang on, commissar, I'm coming!' Jurgen came in at a run, his melta in his hands, and I don't mind admitting my heart leapt to see him. The daemon hesitated, looking apprehensive, insofar as anything approximating a human expression could be said to exist on what passed for its face, and then charged in again. Fortunately I'd taken advantage of its momentary distraction to open the distance, and my aide was able to get off a shot with his melta.

The ravening beam of thermal energy took the thing full in the chest, blasting a hole clean through it, and the abomination fell heavily to the floor. I wasn't about to take its demise for granted, though, and struck out with my chainsword as it writhed at my feet, gouging fresh furrows in the floor as it tried to regain its footing. Its head came free of its body, blinking up at me in outraged astonishment.

Even a daemon generally finds decapitation something of a handicap; after a moment it stopped twitching and lay still.

'Thank you, Jurgen,' I said, with heartfelt relief.

'You're welcome, sir.' My aide shouldered the melta again, and began to rummage through his collection of pouches. 'A drop of tanna? I've got a flask somewhere...'

'In a moment,' I said, indicating the xenos device behind us. The warp portal was still open, and I wanted it sealed at once, before anything else came through. 'Can you put those ball things back in the holes first?'

'Of course, sir.' If he was surprised, he didn't show it, simply stepping up to the crystal plinth. As I'd expected, the tear in the air began to seal itself

as Jurgen approached it, and the trio of balls to move less slowly. He reached out a grime-encrusted hand to seize the nearest, and the others stopped moving, simply hovering in place where they were. 'Where would you like them?'

I indicated the holes they'd occupied the first time I'd seen the device, on the assumption that it had at least been relatively harmless then, and waited while Jurgen slotted the spheres home, one by one. As the last of the trio clicked into place the hole in reality sealed itself, the air returning to its normal consistency, and the corpse of the daemon flickered and vanished, back to wherever it had come from, with the same miniature thundercrack I always associated with the operation of Amberley's displacer field.⁸⁴

'Well, that takes care of that,' I said, as a clatter of bootsoles in the corridor outside announced Makan's return, along with Yaitz and as many skitarii as they'd been able to round up. They came to a sudden halt in the doorway, registering the sudden absence of daemon with surprise and evident relief.

'What happened?' Makan asked, glancing warily around the room, as though expecting the abomination to suddenly jump up and shout 'Surprise!'

'It destabilised,' I said, knowing from long experience that a fragment of the truth is always better than a lie. 'Just in time, too.'

'And the portal?' Makan asked.

'Vanished at the same time the daemon did,' I told him, truthfully enough. I made my way into the corridor, eager to be out of that dreadful chamber, Jurgen at my shoulder. The skitarii stood aside to make room for us to pass, although whether out of respect for men who'd just bested a daemon or reluctance to get too close to my aide I couldn't rightly have said.

'Well, that didn't go quite as well as I'd hoped,' Felicia said, meeting us at the end of the passageway.

'I'd rather gathered that,' I agreed, gratefully taking the tanna which Jurgen had succeeded in locating by this time. 'Any idea what happened?'

'We seem to have increased the output of warp energy rather than damping it,' she told me, which I'd pretty much managed to work out for myself. 'Lucky you were there to deal with the immediate consequences.'

'I suppose so,' I agreed cautiously, before the full meaning of her words penetrated. I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. 'What are the delayed ones likely to be?'

‘Well, the energy readings were far in excess of any we’ve ever recorded,’ Felicia admitted, a trifle reluctantly if I was any judge. ‘It’s quite likely that Varan has the psykers or the specialised equipment to have detected them. Which means he probably knows where we are now.’

‘I see,’ I said, all my old fears suddenly returning, and hoping that he was the only one.

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TWENTY-TWO

I didn't have long to brood, however. No sooner had I emerged into the sunlight again, inhaling the clean air gratefully, despite the lingering aromas of Jurgen and the sun-baked algae lying around the shore of the lake diluting the effect somewhat, than Nelys accosted me.

'Commander Rorkins would like a word,' he said, 'about defending the place. He thought you might have some useful input, having fought here before.' His eyes drifted towards the obelisk for a moment, squinting against the glare. It seemed none the worse for the skirmish with the servitors the last time I'd been here, so far as I could tell, although the westering sun glancing from it replaced any real detail with eye-watering dazzle.

I nodded. After all, that had been my ostensible reason for dragging us out here in the first place, so now we'd arrived I could hardly just tell Rorkins to get on with it, I had more pressing matters to attend to. 'I'll be right there,' I said. 'Can you show me where he's set up?'

Our new headquarters, it turned out, was very like the old one, in that whatever essential equipment we'd been able to jam into the shuttle with us had been ranged about a space never intended to house it, but with a few improvements. Felicia, or more probably Makan, given that the Inquisition apparently took most of the administrative decisions here, had turned over a storage bay used to house construction materials for running repairs to the buildings and infrastructure in more peaceful times for our use as a makeshift command post. As I approached it, a utility servitor plodded past in the opposite direction, pushing a wheeled pallet of piping, apparently the last of the displaced stores. Being a Mechanicus facility, the cleared space was far cleaner and better equipped than most such warehouses would have

been, however, and liberally equipped with power outlets; our communications and detection gear was already up and running when I walked through the door, the engineers from the schola having been supplemented by a tranche of Felicia's staff.

'Cain. Good.' Rorkins beckoned me over to the hololith as I entered, and I picked my way gingerly across the intervening expanse of floor, the tech-priests having been as cavalier as ever about the run of their cables. 'What do you make of this?' Despite being banged about in the cargo hold along with the rest of our kit, not to mention our people, the device was still functioning better than ever, in fact, which spoke volumes for the calibre of the tech-priests Felicia had assigned to assist us.

I glanced at the display, which showed a three-dimensional image of the valley, dotted with icons, recognising the basic troop deployments Yaitz and I had worked out between us on my previous visit almost at once. Rorkins had made a few minor amendments, shortening lines of communication and allowing more firelanes to overlap, and I nodded approvingly. 'Should work,' I conceded, after a long enough pause to give the impression that it was the first time I'd seen it. 'But we'd need more troops.' Yaitz and I had worked on the assumption that his skitarii and whatever help I could bring from the schola would be all the manpower we'd have available.

'That's what the skitarii captain said,' Rorkins informed me. 'But we should be able to get the extra bodies we need. Young Sprie's volunteered to pick up some PDF from the Cainstead garrison.'⁸⁵

'Might as well,' I agreed, switching the image to the spinning globe of Perlia, bringing it into focus with a well-judged thump on the housing of the projection unit, which earned me a reproving look from the most senior tech-priest present, and taking in the scattering of icons marking the presence of hostile and friendly forces. 'There's nothing for them to guard in the middle of the desert in any case.'

For a moment I remembered the raiding force that had vanished without trace in the first assault, and Kayla's remark about sand devils, but forced the thought aside. Prosperity Wells (I never could take the new name seriously) was a long way from the landing site, and if there really were necrons roaming the desert there the local PDF wouldn't be able to do anything about it anyway, other than dying in droves. Far better for them to join us here, and possibly tip the balance in keeping the Shadowlight out of Varan's hands.

‘Yaitz did a good job, all things considered,’ Rorkins said, looking at me narrowly. ‘Almost as if he was expecting to be reinforced by a group of about our size.’

‘I’m sure he had contingency plans for all kinds of conditions,’ I answered blandly. ‘Probably just dusted off the one that best fitted the forces we brought with us.’

‘Probably,’ Rorkins said, in the tone of a man who doesn’t believe a word of it, but has more pressing matters to take care of at the moment. ‘Do you have any thoughts about how we should proceed?’

‘I think this is the best plan anyone’s likely to come up with,’ I said, having already thrashed out the alternatives with Yaitz and Makan at considerable length. ‘The weak point’s going to be the new road. The old one funnelled everything through the mouth of the valley, and across the dam, which played into our hands very nicely, but the new route bypasses most of the choke points.’ In order to compensate for that, Yaitz had mined the service road, and set up support weapon emplacements to bracket it from the brow of the ridge, but against a sufficiently determined assault that might not turn out to be enough.

‘Yes, I noticed that.’ Rorkins nodded judiciously. ‘Not a lot we can do about it, though. Except put more troopers on the ground.’

‘Maybe Sprie can ferry a few more in when he gets back from Prosperity Wells,’ I said, glancing at the hololith again. ‘There must be a few more garrisons some way from the fighting we can redeploy.’ On this continent, anyway; everything we could spare on the western one was being thrown into a cordon around Havendown, trying to stop the inexorable spread of the stain in the hololith marking the limits of Varan’s influence. It still seemed to be growing, although the fighting wasn’t any more intense than before, and I was put in mind of a tumour, inexorably turning the cells of a healthy body against itself. My palms tingled, usually a reliable sign that my subconscious has spotted something the forebrain hasn’t quite brought into focus yet, but the tenuous shiver of intuition didn’t coalesce into anything concrete. Knowing better than to try to force it, I was on the verge of turning away when something about the enemy icons attracted my attention. A lot of them were moving, eastwards, in our direction.

Luckily Sprie returned before nightfall, bringing a full platoon of PDF regulars to join us, which boosted morale considerably. Even better, from

my point of view, were the half-dozen Chimeras that came with them. I could have done with a Leman Russ or two as well, but in the absence of any actual tanks, the turreted multi-lasers of the APCs would give our collective firepower a very welcome shot in the arm. Not that it looked like making much of a difference against a force the size of the one I expected to be ranged against us, but right now I was prepared to accept every bit of help I could get.

‘It doesn’t look good,’ I confided to Makan, who, in the interest of maintaining his cover, had been excluded from the tactical meetings. We were standing by the obelisk, in the vague hope that anyone seeing us talking would assume I was reliving old glories. I suppose I could have briefed him properly in the hidden facility beneath the shrine itself, but I didn’t want anyone asking awkward questions about where I’d disappeared to, and, if I’m honest, my experiences down there earlier in the day had left me reluctant to return. ‘There’s a wave of shuttles inbound from Havendown, due within the hour, with another a short way behind them. Much larger, of course.’

‘Sounds like the same strategy they used before,’ Makan said speculatively. ‘Send in a wave of expendables to wear us down, and follow up with the heavy stuff.’

‘Pretty much how I read it,’ I agreed, raising my voice a little over the snarling of the Chimera engines, as the first of our reinforcements lurched down the shuttle’s boarding ramp. ‘The big question is what the expendables have been briefed to do: locate the Shadowlight, or just cause as much trouble as possible. I think the first incursion we saw off was an attempt to find it, maybe even extract it, but the damage Orelus did to their ships put paid to that.’ I pulled out my data-slate, and filled him in on the conclusions I’d drawn about some of the apparently random landings, and the connections Brasker had made to local legends which might point to the sites being connected to the ancients in some way.

‘Interesting,’ Makan said, having heard me out without interruption. ‘I’ll ask Sparsen to be on the alert for any sign of a psyker with them. If there is, they’ll probably be trying to locate the Shadowlight. If not, it’s just another commando raid.’

Leaving him to digest the information, I made my way back to the command centre, narrowing my eyes against the glare of the setting sun, which was making the wide expanse of water beside us look uncomfortably

like a vast pool of blood. Rorkins and Julien were discussing the latest tactical updates with Yaitz as I entered the warehouse, any lingering animosity between skitarii and Sororitas apparently forgotten in the common cause of survival, and I lost no time in picking my way towards them through the tangle of cables, which, if anything, appeared to have thickened in my absence.

‘Our latest information puts the first wave at five shuttles,’ Rorkins was saying as I joined the group around the hololith. ‘The auspex contacts are strong, and we’ve got a good estimate of their speed and time of arrival.’

‘Which is when?’ I asked, as levelly as I could.

‘Thirty-five to forty minutes, if the headwinds remain constant,’ Julien told me.

‘Just before sunset, in other words,’ Yaitz added. That wasn’t good; approaching from the west, they’d be coming almost directly out of the sun, leaving our gunners dazzled by the glare.

I glanced at my chronograph. ‘The Chimeras should be in position by then,’ I said. ‘At least that’ll give us some air cover.’ Not much, though. In theory the multi-lasers could inflict a lot of damage on an aircraft, especially one that hadn’t been armoured and hardened to military specifications, but they’d need to be fired with considerable precision to do so. I found myself thinking nostalgically of the auspex-guided hydra batteries we’d relied on for air defence during my years with the Imperial Guard, or even the heavy bolters the Chimeras of the 597th had mounted, which could throw enough ordnance into the air to have at least a sporting chance of bringing a target down, but, as so often, we’d just have to make do with what we could get. I tapped my comm-bead. ‘Kayla, how’s the deployment coming?’

‘We’re on top of it,’ the cadet reassured me. ‘Just offloading the last of the Chimeras now, and Garvie’s pointing the troops in the direction they’re supposed to go.’

‘Good. Carry on.’ I nodded to the others. ‘We’ll be ready for them when they get here,’ I said, with a confidence I was far from feeling.

‘Glad to hear it,’ Rorkins said, turning to Yaitz. ‘Are the demo charges along the dam primed?’

‘They are.’ Yaitz nodded. ‘Although it goes without saying they should only be detonated as a last resort. The blessings of the Omnissiah should be venerated, not casually cast aside.’

‘Of course,’ Rorkins said, although I knew he was practical enough to be more concerned about wasting a major tactical advantage than the tech-priests’ sensibilities. ‘Chances are they’ll have more sense than to put down where we can flush them away anyhow.’

I nodded, finding it hard to disagree.

‘How’s morale holding up?’ Julien asked, glancing in my direction.

‘Reasonably well,’ I assured her. I had most of the cadets wandering around our deployment area, spouting the usual platitudes and listening out for any signs of defeatism, but so far all our people seemed focussed and disciplined. Which was pretty much what I’d have expected, given that they’d been trained for this since childhood, and their instructors had already completed a lifetime of exemplary service to the Imperium. (Apart from me, of course, but nobody needed to know that.) The PDF reinforcements were liable to be jumpy, though, and I made a mental note to visit their command squad, and send the cadets round to have a word with the rest. That ought to settle them nicely.

‘If anyone cares to participate, I’ll be holding a brief service next to the memorial, to ask the Emperor for his blessing,’ Julien said. ‘In about ten minutes.’

‘I’ll pass the word along,’ I promised her. I doubted that many would attend, most of our people and the PDF deployed too far away to make it there and back to their positions before the enemy arrived, but it would certainly help settle the waverers. As always, I found myself suspecting that Him on Earth would have rather more important things to do than listen to us whining for special favours, but it certainly wouldn’t hurt to ask, and if the fate of the galaxy really was at stake He might be a bit more inclined than usual to take an interest. ‘Perhaps we could relay the prayers by vox, so the ones who can’t leave their posts can join in if they wish.’

‘Good idea,’ Julien said, nodding in approval. She gestured to the nearest of the tech-priests, one of the group who’d accompanied us from the schola, and who I vaguely remembered seeing around the place from time to time, generally rigging wires from one room to another, or rolling them up again. ‘Gray, can you set that up for me?’

‘Yes, ma’am. Not a problem,’ the engineeer assured her, and trotted away.

After a little more discussion, which all boiled down to us being as ready as we were ever going to be, I turned away, preparing to follow Julien from the command post. Not that I intended wasting any time at her little prayer

meeting, of course: I had my cadets to chivvy up, and the PDF to motivate, but her departure seemed to mark a definite end to the conversation, which was in danger of becoming somewhat circular by that point in any case. We all knew we were about to have a hard fight on our hands, and that the weight of numbers was all with the enemy. Despite my usual cynicism, I began to hope that Julien would get her little miracle after all.

‘Sir,’ the vox-operator said, turning to Rorkins, ‘I’m getting a message from Commodore Visiter. He says it’s urgent.’

‘Of course it is,’ Rorkins said heavily. ‘With our luck, he’s probably spotted the orks coming back for another go as well.’ He sighed. ‘Put him through.’

After a second or two the Commodore’s head and shoulders appeared in the hololith, wavering slightly as such devices generally did.

‘We’ve just had an interestin’ development,’ he reported, without preamble. ‘As we can’t get to the enemy ships in close orbit, we’ve started evacuatin’ the void stations in the outer system.’ A wise precaution, as the enemy fleet had bypassed them on the way in, heading for the more strategically important target of Perlia itself, but would almost certainly turn their attention to these pockets of potential resistance once they had the time, and until they did, the resources they contained would be a considerable help in maintaining Visiter’s ramshackle fleet at battle readiness. ‘When we got to the astropathic relay station in the halo, they’d just picked up a message. There’s a Navy task force inbound from Keffia. No estimated time of arrival, but there’s definitely help on the way.’

‘Praise the Emperor!’ Rorkins said, with considerable feeling, and I must admit that my heart suddenly felt considerably lighter. A spontaneous cheer erupted from several of the control lecterns, which Rorkins let go, despite the clear breach of discipline, a very sensible decision in my opinion. ‘Relay the news on every channel you can, vox, pict, cleft stick if you can manage it.’ He turned to me, the light of renewed determination in his eyes. ‘We’re not alone any more. All we need to do now is hang on until they get here.’

‘True,’ I agreed. The news, though as welcome as it was unexpected, was a double-edged sword. It would put fresh heart into the beleaguered defenders, right enough, and prevent any more defections among the demoralised (no one was going to switch sides with the prospect of retribution both real and immediate), but the enemy would know they were

running out of time to achieve their objective, and Varan would undoubtedly redouble his efforts to secure the Shadowlight. 'But they're not here yet.'

Keffia was close by, it was true, but there were no guarantees where warp travel was concerned, time having very little meaning in the conventional sense aboard a vessel in transit, and we had no idea when the relieving force had set out in the first place. I tried to remember how long it had taken my old regiment to make the same trip, back in the relatively carefree days of my long-forgotten youth, but the details remained fuzzy, overlaid with more pleasant memories of the shipboard romance I'd enjoyed with Karrie on the way, and the considerably less comfortable time I'd subsequently spent aboard the lifepod which had dropped me so precipitately into the middle of ork-held territory.

I glanced at the hololith, where a local tactical display had replaced the image of the commodore. The first wave of enemy transports were still inbound, closing fast, and we'd be fighting for our lives within moments.

As I left the command post, I heard Julien commencing her prayers in the earpiece of my comm-bead, and, for once in my life, felt the urge to join in.



TWENTY-THREE

‘Here they come,’ Lieutenant Grouber said, narrowing his eyes against the glare of the setting sun. I’d made it to the PDF command Chimera with several minutes to spare before the attack commenced, finding the young officer in charge both reassuringly competent and gratifyingly awestruck by the presence of the hero he’d been brought up to venerate as the saviour of his planet. He’d had the good sense to station himself close to the ridge line, where he’d get a good view of the course of the battle without attracting too much incoming fire, which had been something of a consideration for me as well.

From up here I could look down on the main building of the Mechanicus shrine, with a clear view of the piazza, our parked shuttle, and the dam beyond. The blue-grey mass of the lake seemed ominous and brooding in the fading light, its surface undulating gently under the influence of a moderate breeze, although the disc of the sun apparently balanced on the tops of the distant peaks was still painting the face of the vast rockcrete wall holding back the waters a rich, warm red, which reminded me incongruously of autumnal woodlands and log fires. The other Chimeras had been dispersed around the valley, rather than being massed in a single, easy target, and the rest of our people were dug in according to the battle plan; if I had any doubts about our strategy, now would be a bad time for them to occur to me. Fortunately I couldn’t think of any last-minute revisions, so I held my tongue, and tried to focus on the distant dots skimming the surface of the surrounding slopes.

‘Here you are, sir,’ Jurgen said, handing me an amplivisor, and I raised it to my eyes cautiously, but he’d already set the polarisers to maximum, so despite my fears I remained undazzled by the glare.

‘They’re coming in just above the deck,’ I said, impressed in spite of myself. Even a pilot of Sprie’s calibre would probably think twice about attempting to fly nap of earth at high speed in mountainous terrain, let alone in tight formation and poor light conditions. Their recklessness was a weakness, I reminded myself, typical of the low value followers of Chaos placed on their own lives, as well as those of everyone else.

‘Hold your fire,’ Rorkins said, on the general command channel, his voice sounding calm and professional, and everyone complied, even the PDF, to my vague surprise. ‘Let them get close enough to be sure of a target.’ I could hear the howl of their engines now, a rising note which set the hairs on the back of my neck bristling, and drew my laspistol, although I wouldn’t have the slightest chance of damaging any of the incoming shuttles with it. The turret of the Chimera next to me shifted a little, the motor of its traverser whining like the motivators of Julien’s power armour, and I glanced up.

‘Steady there, gunner,’ I said. All we needed was for some trigger-happy idiot to open up prematurely, and what little advantage we had would be blown. If, on the other hand, everyone kept a cool head, with any luck the enemy wouldn’t realise that we’d been reinforced, at least not until it was far too late for them to do anything about it.

‘It isn’t him, sir,’ Grouber volunteered, a little diffidently. ‘It’s that thing the tech-priests put in.’

‘What thing?’ I asked, lowering the amplivisor for a moment.

The young lieutenant peered down at me from the turret hatch, looking a little confused, as his perch continued to rotate, barely perceptibly, under him. ‘I don’t rightly know, sir,’ he said at last. ‘But the one with the metal face said you’d authorised it.’

‘Oh, right, that thing,’ I said, as though the matter was of little interest, and turned away, activating my comm-bead. ‘Felicia. What have you done to my Chimeras?’

‘Given them a little edge,’ the familiar voice said cheerily. ‘Tied an automatic targeter into the auspex array of the command one, with a vox-link to the rest. It’s an unholy lash-up, given the time we had available, but it’ll just have to do until we can burn the incense properly and recalibrate. If it works at all.’

‘Well it seems to be doing something,’ I assured her, feeling the first faint stirrings of optimism for what felt like a very long time.

‘Good.’ Felicia sounded as pleased with herself as ever, and I found myself wondering if she was actually enjoying the chance to relive the adventures of her youth. ‘If we managed to propitiate the machine spirits with the right prayers and programming, they should open fire as soon as they’ve got a lock. If not, you’ll have to get the gunners to do it manually.’

‘How will they know if they have to?’ I asked, and Felicia chuckled, the warm sound I remembered so well from so many years ago.

‘The pict screen will light up, and display the message “Fire Now,”’ she said. ‘I remember how you always took the direct approach to things.’

‘Lieutenant,’ I said casually, glancing up, ‘the magos tells me her people blessed the targeting systems so the Omnissiah itself can manifest through them, and strike down our enemies. Don’t be alarmed if they...’

I never got the chance to complete the sentence, as the multi-laser in the turret fired, the miniature thundercrack drowning out everything, even the rising scream of the approaching shuttle engines. For a moment I thought the sound was echoing from the surrounding hills, then I realised that the vox-relay had done its work despite the lack of incense, and the other five had fired too, almost simultaneously. Raising my amplivisor again I tried to focus on the approaching shuttles.

‘A hit, by the Emperor!’ I cried jubilantly, then corrected myself. ‘No, two at least!’ The outermost aircraft on either side of the formation were both losing speed and altitude, which made sense to me, as the Chimeras were ranged along each side of the valley, and the machine spirits, logical as ever, would simply have sought the nearest targets. The turret rotated rapidly, Grouber looking a little seasick, as the cogitators tried for another lock, but the pilots had reacted almost at once, diving for the floor of the valley, lower than the barrels could depress. The engine of the shuttle farthest from us was leaking smoke, and it seemed to be responding more sluggishly, but it followed its fellows nevertheless.

‘That one’s still coming,’ Grouber said, and I focussed on the nearest ship. It seemed to be in a bad way, sideslipping as it came, with most of its control surfaces shot away. Flames were flickering along its underside, and I didn’t envy its occupants in the slightest.

‘See if you can take another crack at it,’ I suggested, and the Chimera’s turret rotated again, but too late; the crippled shuttle roared over our heads, battering us for a moment with the downdraft of its passage, to vanish over the other side of the ridge. A moment later the engine noise ceased, with the

unmistakable *crump!* of impact.

‘Holy Emperor,’ Grouber breathed. For a moment I thought he was reacting to the crash, but the direction of his gaze was in the other direction, towards the dam and the hydro station beside the vast reservoir. The attacking aircraft were rising now, a manoeuvre I recognised from having been in shuttles doing the same thing myself, intending to pop up over the lip of the dam, using its bulk to shield themselves from defensive fire for as long as possible. I started to vox a warning, but there was no need; from my elevated perspective I could see Yaitz’s skitarii fanning out to meet the threat, the more ponderous figures of heavy weapon servitors plodding in their wake, and I found myself wondering just how many of the metal and flesh combat constructs they actually had stowed away beneath the shrine. (Not to mention how they intended explaining their presence to Rorkins.)

‘I don’t think that one’s going to make it, sir,’ Jurgen remarked conversationally, as though commenting on the weather, and I focussed the amplivisor again. My aide was right, I thought, the crippled shuttle was trying to maintain formation with its fellows, but it was clearly responding far too sluggishly. As the undamaged three rose over the lip of the dam, into a barrage of fire from the skitarii and a couple of squads of our storm-trooper cadets, the damaged one ploughed into the rockcrete a few metres below the rim, exploding into a fireball so bright it stabbed my retina. ‘That’s two down,’ my aide said, in tones of unmistakable satisfaction.

‘Let’s just hope it doesn’t—’ I began to say, an instant before it did, and a secondary explosion ripped a ragged hole in the face of the dam. One of the explosive charges we’d placed to blow the structure if we needed to had been detonated by the impact. I held my breath, but none of the others went off, thank the Emperor. Even so, the damage had been done. A section of the retaining wall fell away, propelled by the force of the water behind it, to shatter against the turbine hall at the base of the structure, and a vast new waterfall jetted out through the gap, filling the old river bed beyond as neatly as though someone had turned on a tap.

‘Any casualties?’ I voxed, hoping that none of our people had been caught in the explosion or swept away. The wall of water rushing along the floor of the valley was modest enough compared to the tidal wave we’d unleashed against the orks, but it wouldn’t do anyone down there any favours.

‘Not yet,’ Rorkins reassured me, ‘but we’ve lost the chance of flushing them out if they land in the valley.’ That much was true: I doubted that even

Varan would be mad enough to put down there now, the breach in the dam being obvious to even the most cursory of glances. Even if he wasn't prepared for us to collapse it on purpose, the danger of it giving way of its own accord was now quite manifest.

Any further comment would have been superfluous, and we both had our attention on other matters by then anyway. The surviving shuttles were landing, somewhat heavily, and the first troops were disembarking, taking what cover they could from the withering fire the skitarii and Rorkins's cadets were pouring into them. They seemed to be giving as good as they got, though; our own people were being very nicely suppressed by the heretics' heavy weapon teams, and the beachhead might well have been consolidated in pretty short order if it hadn't been for the combat servitors, which continued to plod forwards, soaking it up and replying in kind.

'Cain.' Makan's voice cut into my comm-bead, on a frequency I was sure no one else had access to. 'Sparsen says he can sense psykers with them. Looks like your guess was right.'

'Then we'd better hope we can hold them,' I said, catching sight of some movement near the corner of the main shrine, which turned out to be a couple of squads of Grouber's PDF launching a flanking attack. The lieutenant was inside the command Chimera by now, co-ordinating things with the aid of the specialised vox and auspex kit it carried, and seemed to be doing a reasonable job, so I thought it best not to interrupt him. I was on the point of turning away, to check on the progress of the battle on the other flank, when I saw a couple of black greatcoats moving with the troopers, and steadied the amplivisor again. 'Nelys,' I voxed, 'what in the name of the Throne do you think you're playing at?'

'Supporting the troopers, sir.' The distance was too great for me to make out his facial expression, but I could picture the dogged set of his jaw all too easily. 'Like you asked us to.'

'We thought it wouldn't be too good for morale if we refused to go in alongside them,' Kayla cut in, backing him up, and I had to admit they were both thinking like commissars.

'Very good,' I said, trying not to sound too concerned. 'Watch your backs, and don't take too many chances.' At least Kayla's streak of common sense ought to keep them out of trouble, insofar as that was possible on the battlefield.

I wasn't able to observe much of what happened next, although I kept

catching enough chatter in my comm-bead to keep roughly abreast of how the clash of arms was progressing, as my attention was suddenly grabbed by the unmistakable sound of lasguns firing on the other side of the ridge.

‘There must have been some survivors of the shuttle crash,’ Grouber said, looking up from his tactical display, an expectant look on his face. There were four other troopers with him, like any command squad, but most of them were busy manning the auspex and comms gear, working flat out to communicate with the other elements of the platoon, and for the first time I began to regret spreading them out so much. The Chimera crew might be dragooned into carrying lasguns and going off to investigate, but that would mean we wouldn’t be able to move in a hurry if we needed to, always a strong possibility with gunfire in the immediate vicinity.

‘But who are they firing at?’ I asked, the palms of my hands beginning to prickle. All our people had been deployed inside the valley. I activated the comm-bead. ‘If anyone’s out of position, report now.’

No one replied, although I gathered from the other vox traffic that Julien and her novitiates were getting stuck in down at the shrine, their bolters and power armour proving more than adequate against the lasguns of the heretics.

‘We’ll have to go and take a look,’ I concluded, trying to filter the reluctance out of my voice. There was no one else to do it, and I could hardly compromise my heroic reputation in front of Grouber, not if I needed him to go on trusting me, which I probably did for my continued wellbeing. Besides, as so often in my life, it seemed essential to know what we were facing, the risk of remaining in ignorance far greater than taking the chance of going to find out.

So Jurgen and I slipped away into the gathering dusk, the sun almost completely set by now, the weight of the laspistol a reassuring presence in my hand, and, if I’m honest, the olfactory reminder of Jurgen’s proximity an even greater one, given the melta he carried. The sky was still light enough to see by, although it wouldn’t be for long, the colours of everything leaching away as the lengthening shadows faded into shades of deep blue.

We crested the ridge cautiously, crouching in the lee of a clump of scrub so we wouldn’t be skylined, and started down the other side. The site of the crash was obvious, vivid orange flames leaping into the purpling firmament, and I found myself grateful that the prevailing wind was at our backs. The bracken covering these hillsides would burn readily, I was sure,

but any brushfires started by the blazing wreckage would spread in the other direction.

As we got closer the crackle of lasweapons intensified, and I began to make out a clearer picture of the skirmish taking place in front of us. The shuttle had hit hard, disintegrating on impact, but a few of the traitors within must have survived. They were bunched together behind a tangled lump of metal which looked as if it might once have been part of the engines, exchanging fire with a dispersed group of shadowy figures, who seemed to be using the deeper darkness around the circle of light cast by the flames to pick them off whenever they got a reasonable line of sight, relatively safe from retaliation. Dazzled by the light of the conflagration around them, the heretics would have been unable to make out their assailants, while being brightly illuminated themselves. As Jurgen and I approached the hellish tableau another of the survivors pitched forward, thrashed for a moment, and lay still.

‘I got one!’ a feminine voice cried.

‘Shut up, Franka! They can hear you, even if they can’t see!’ a testy voice admonished in a hoarse whisper. A moment later, as if to emphasise the point, a las-bolt cracked through the darkness in the general direction the girl’s voice had come from. A second squeal, and a sudden thrashing of undergrowth, told me that she’d belatedly dived for cover, but that the shot had predictably missed. ‘Stupid girl!’ the other voice added.

‘Manrin?’ I asked quietly, keeping my back to the fire to allow my eyes to adjust to the low light levels, confident that Jurgen would pick off anyone discourteous enough to take aim in our direction. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’

‘Commissar?’ the corporal asked, equally dumbfounded, coming gradually into focus as a block of thicker shadow a few metres away from me. ‘I thought you’d gone back to Havendown.’

‘Long story,’ I told him, in a tone that effectively precluded any explanation at the time, then softened it, injecting just the right degree of friendliness. ‘Besides, I asked first.’

‘We saw the shuttle come down,’ Manrin explained, ‘and came to investigate. They opened fire as soon as we approached, so we knew they were heretics.’ A reasonable inference, as any loyalists would know Chilinvale was still in Imperial hands. ‘What’s going on in the valley?’ It was pointless to deny that something was, as the sounds of the battle were

carrying clearly on the wind, and occasional flashes of light lit the sky like Conflagration Night fireworks.

‘The enemy are trying to take the Mechanicus shrine,’ I said, sticking to the highlights. ‘It’s imperative that they don’t.’ I listened to the chatter in my comm-bead for a moment, learning that two of the enemy shuttles appeared to be in our hands by this time, and that Julien’s charge seemed to have broken the back of the enemy assault. ‘Fortunately we seem to be winning.’ Until the second wave got here, anyway. I glanced at the burning wreck behind us, and the dwindling band of heretics within its dubious shelter; the militia detachment were making up in enthusiasm what they lacked in accuracy, and I didn’t imagine the beleaguered traitors would be able to hold out for much longer. ‘Do you think we could take any of them alive?’ Not that we’d get much useful intelligence, if our experience with the Madasans was anything to go by, but anything at all we could learn about the main battle force before it got here would be a bonus.

‘Good idea, sir,’ Jaq put in, materialising at my shoulder. ‘There’s only a couple of them left. Go in with the straight silver, sir, they don’t like it, heretics don’t. They’ll surrender before you can say “The Emperor Protects”.’

Well, it wasn’t much of a plan, but it was the best we had, and I’d match my duelling skills against a heretic foot soldier any day, so after a few moments consultation the PDV contingent started laying down suppressive fire against the survivor’s fragile refuge. It wasn’t particularly well coordinated, but it did the job, and as soon as I was certain that our targets’ attention was fully engaged, I charged forward into the burning wreck, Jurgen at my heels. (To be honest, I was more worried about taking a stray round from the militia by that point than any retaliation from the heretics.)

The heat was greater than I expected, slapping me in the face as we began dodging through pieces of debris, and those passengers who hadn’t survived the initial impact. We took the traitors completely by surprise, a trooper in the uniform of a Perlian being reduced to a greasy stain by a blast from Jurgen’s melta, while I accounted for a Madasan on the other flank with a single las-bolt. There was only one survivor left after that, clad in a grubby greatcoat, a scarlet sash knotted at his waist, aiming a laspistol in my direction.

Astonished, I faltered for a heartbeat, aware that the hesitation might be the death of me, but unable to override the impulse despite that. ‘Donal?’ I

asked, still not managing to believe the evidence of my own eyes.

‘Death to the servants of...’ he began, then a look of confusion drifted across his face, and his aim wavered. A powerful burst of Jurgen’s body odour, intensified as always by high temperatures, arrived at my shoulder an instant before the man himself. ‘Commissar? What’s happening?’ His tormented expression, so different from the easy self-confidence I was used to seeing, intensified.

‘I’m not entirely sure,’ I said, walking forwards, Jurgen at my side, the melta ready for use again in his hands. The closer we got, the more distressed Donal seemed to become. ‘I thought you were dead.’

‘I wish I was!’ Donal said, with unexpected vehemence, tearing his coat off and flinging it into the nearest concentration of flames. As it singed, then combusted, with an acrid tang of burning fibre, I was just able to see that the Imperial icons on it had been desecrated with Chaotic sigils, like the body armour of the defectors I’d fought before. ‘I can still feel the taint, gnawing at my mind...’ He seemed on the verge of losing it, so I took another step closer, Jurgen dogging my heels as always.

‘Commissar Donal, report,’ I said, injecting a little of the parade ground into my voice, wondering even as I did so if it was the right approach to take. Fortunately it was, old habits and learned responses kicking in, to override whatever it was which had wrought so bizarre a change in him. ‘What happened after we left the palace?’

‘It was Varan,’ Donal said, his voice sounding as though it was forcing its way past a blockade in his throat. ‘He spoke to us.’ His face contorted, mirroring the battle going on in his mind between two diametrically opposed viewpoints. ‘He just told us the truth was lies, and the lies became truth.’

‘He’s gone barmy, sir,’ Jurgen said, as constitutionally incapable as ever of reconciling a paradox.

‘Not exactly,’ I said, the mental image of a spreading tumour that had occurred to me back at the command post returning with renewed force. Up until now I’d been taking it for granted that Varan had psykers in his retinue, which he very likely did, but what if he was a psyker himself? One with a very specific, and very dangerous, talent... A cold thread of terror wrapped itself around my heart, and began to constrict. If I was right, and he was on his way to the Valley of Daemons in person, then there was nothing I could do to keep the Shadowlight out of his hands, every ally I’d

been able to cozen and dragoon here another potential recruit to the enemy cause, furthering his chance of success. 'Oh frak.' With an effort, I turned my attention back to Donal. 'How close did he get before he affected your mind? Yours and the Governor's?'

'He was in the room,' Donal said, looking and sounding more like a fever patient in the grip of delirium by the minute.

'Quite close, then,' I probed, hoping for clarification. If he needed to be within a handful of metres to pull off his party trick, that wouldn't be too bad...

'Line of sight,' Donal gasped, the residue of the warmaster's influence evidently waning in the face of Jurgen's ability to nullify psychic phenomena. 'And earshot. Anyone who can see and hear him...' His face contorted again. 'They filled the scrumball stadium with prisoners: PDF, civilians, anyone they could round up. The minute he spoke, he had them all...'

Wonderful, I thought. All he has to do is step off the shuttle, grab an amplivox, and we all go over to the enemy. Even positioning sharpshooters wouldn't help; they'd have to see him clearly to get a shot, and unless they were deaf he'd have turned them into puppets before they could pull the trigger. Even earplugs probably wouldn't help, if the effect was psychic rather than physical.

There was only one thing left to do, to evaluate just how grave the threat was, and I found myself reluctant to do it; Donal had suffered more than enough already. But he was a commissar, I'd made him one myself: he'd understand, if anyone would, the stern dictates of duty.

'Jurgen,' I said, 'take three steps directly away from Commissar Donal.' Most men, no doubt, would have at least expressed some measure of curiosity, but, true to form, my aide simply complied with the instruction.

Donal twitched, his arm coming up, and the laspistol wavering indecisively in my direction. 'Death to... the servants...' he gasped, then just as I was wondering if I'd found out what I needed to know too late, and at too high a price, a trace of his old character reasserted itself. 'Sorry, sir,' he said, with a hint of the self-assurance I remembered, 'it's just too strong to fight for long. Kick his arse for me.' Then he snuggled the muzzle of his laspistol under his chin, and pulled the trigger.

'What happened?' Manrin asked, as Jurgen and I re-emerged from the

burning remains of the downed shuttle, my weapons once more hanging from my belt. 'Did you kill them all?'

'They're all dead,' I answered, keeping my voice as neutral as I could. There was no point in relieving my feelings by taking them out on the militia. 'But I got the information I needed.' I finished folding the sash I'd given to Donal, such a short time ago, and stuffed it into a convenient pocket. The sounds of firing from over the ridge had stopped, I noted with a detached corner of my mind, and listened to the voices in my earpiece for a moment. Their general tone was self-congratulatory, and after checking that no more of my cadets were among the casualties, I turned back to Manrin. 'Send your people home.'

'Begging your pardon, sir, but we'd like to volunteer to assist,' Jaq said. Before my conversation with Donal, I would probably have taken him up on it, but now I felt that every extra body standing between Varan and the Shadowlight was an extra opportunity for him to get his hands on the blasted thing. Not for the first time, I found myself wishing that whoever had dug it up in the first place had had the common sense to just bury it again.

'Your zeal is both noted and appreciated,' I said, 'but the battle is over. The war, however, goes on, and your place is in Chilinvale, defending your homes and loved ones.'

'Very good, sir,' Manrin said, with a faint trace of relief, and began rounding his people up. After a few moments they disappeared into the darkness, and I realised for the first time that night had now fallen in earnest. Shortly thereafter I heard the sound of a truck engine bursting into life, then fading away in the general direction of the town, leaving me alone with my thoughts as Jurgen and I began to plod up the hillside.

The night was cloudless, thank the Emperor, and the faint glimmer of starlight, supplemented by the spectacular display of the debris belt, the fringes of which left streaks of fire across the sky every few seconds, was more than enough to see by. We moved cautiously nevertheless, as I had no wish to turn an ankle on the uneven ground, or catch my boot in the fibrous undergrowth. Our slow progress seemed frustrating at the time, although, looking back, I have no doubt that it saved our lives.

As we approached the crest of the ridge, a flicker of movement caught my eye, and I gestured my aide to stillness. Something was reflecting the starlight, a faint glimmer of blue-white against metal, and suspecting that it

might be the barrel of a gun, perhaps being carried by an enemy fleeing the battle, or who had made their way to safety from the shuttle crash, I raised the amplivisor.

The reality was a thousand times worse. Humanoid figures, sculpted in metal, but which moved with sinister purpose, and an inhuman, fluid grace that somehow made them even more terrifying. They walked, unhurried, along the ridge line, the leading one carrying a device of some kind, with which it swept the valley below. The others were armed, the unmistakable silhouettes of gauss flayers held ready for use, the sinister necrotic glow which would normally have revealed their presence masked by a shroud of some flexible metal fabric.

‘Necrons,’ I told Jurgen, in a barely audible whisper. The fears, which I’d sought to dismiss for so long were grounded in reality after all. After an indeterminate time, which was probably no more than a few minutes, for all that it felt like a lifetime, the leading automaton stopped moving, consulted the device in its hand, then raised its other arm, pointing in the direction of the shrine. ‘And they seem to have found the Shadowlight.’ Hardly surprising, given their mastery of warp technology, and the amount of energy we’d released that afternoon.

‘That’s not good, is it, sir?’ Jurgen asked, with his usual flair for understatement.

‘No, it’s not,’ I agreed. The necron scouting party remained as immobile as the statues they resembled for another instant, then vanished, with a faint crackle of energy and displaced air. So far as I could see, it was now a race between Varan and the metal horrors to reach the device first: leaving us squarely in the middle. Any way I looked at it, our chances of surviving the next few hours had just dropped from slim to negligible.



TWENTY-FOUR

‘It seems we’re out of options,’ Rorkins said, with a glance at the hololith. I’d cleared the command centre of all but our most senior people, and those of us left were an ill-assorted group, for the most part staring at the contact runes marking the progress of Varan’s airborne armada as though they could be diverted by willpower alone. Unfortunately they couldn’t, and by my estimate would be right on top of us within the hour. Just before dawn, in fact, the warmaster being nothing if not predictable in his tactics. ‘Evacuation is clearly impossible.’

‘Nevertheless, I want everyone given clear instructions to fall back to the shuttles if the worst happens,’ I said. We’d never manage to squeeze Grouber’s troopers, Felicia’s people, and the Inquisition contingent into the one we’d arrived in, along with our own schola cadets and instructors, but the enemy had thoughtfully provided us with a trio of reasonably intact spares, a couple of which Sprie’s fellow naval cadets could pilot to safety if push came to shove.

‘But what about the Shadowlight?’ Felicia demanded. ‘It must be protected at all costs!’ I’d thought long and hard about revealing the secret of its existence to Rorkins and Julien on the nerve-shredding walk back to Grouber’s Chimera, during which every stray sound had made me start nervously, wondering if the metal killers had returned, but on balance I felt that their previous connections to the Inquisition made them sufficiently trustworthy, and if they were going to die in the next few hours, at the very least they deserved to know why. Felicia and Makan had been less than thrilled by this decision, as you can imagine, but it seemed to me that if we were going to have even a prayer of keeping the Shadowlight out of Varan’s hands, we all needed to be singing from the same psalter.

‘I’ve got Yaitz rigging demo charges around the chamber it’s in,’ I said. ‘If we have to pull out, we can collapse the whole shrine on top of it. Digging the thing out again after that’s going to be a major operation, which should buy us enough time to organise a counterattack.’

‘Blow up the shrine,’ Felicia said, in a dangerous monotone. ‘Perhaps you should just call in an orbital strike, and make really sure of the job.’

‘Nothing Visiter has is accurate enough,’ Rorkins said, apparently taking the remark at face value, and what was left of the tech-priest’s face took on an expression which would have intimidated an ork. ‘And even if it was, he couldn’t get into position past the enemy warships.’

‘Which the Navy can take care of as soon as they get here,’ Julien put in impatiently. ‘Let’s just stick to the point, shall we?’

‘It’s a last resort, of course,’ I reassured Felicia. Realistically, I didn’t think any of us were likely to be around to press the button in any case, but that wouldn’t stop me trying my hardest to be wrong.

‘So was blowing up the dam,’ she said pointedly, reining in her temper with an effort only I knew her well enough to recognise.

Fortunately, at that point, the hololith flickered, and Visiter’s face appeared. ‘Sorry to interrupt,’ he said, taking in the array of faces staring at his image with some surprise, ‘but we’ve had another interestin’ development.’

‘Has the task force arrived?’ Rorkins asked eagerly, and Visiter shook his head.

‘No sign of ‘em yet, but we’re scannin’ on all frequencies. We’ll let you know as soon as they drop out of warp.’ His image flickered for a moment, then steadied again. ‘Which is how we spotted this. There’s a ship hidin’ in the debris belt. We only spotted ‘em because they began powerin’ up a few minutes ago.’ The picture in the hololith flickered, then changed, to a shape I recognised all too well despite the passage of more than seventy years; if it wasn’t the vessel which had obliterated the *Omniissiah’s Blessing* in orbit around Interitus Prime with a single energy burst, stranding me on the desolate tomb world surrounded by necrons, it was certainly another of the same class. Visiter’s voice continued behind the picture. ‘Class unknown,⁸⁶ but it’s only the size of an escort. We can take it easily enough.’

‘Absolutely not!’ I said in horror, picturing the result of such an attempt all too easily. The fragile SDF boats would be reduced to their component atoms in a single volley. ‘Don’t even think about engaging it.’

‘Looks like we won’t get the chance anyway,’ Visiter said, with a trace of regret. ‘The heretics have spotted it. A couple of their destroyers are moving to intercept.’ He kept the pict feed running, the starfield behind the necron vessel moving slightly as the long-range imagifiers panned a little to keep it in view. A moment later it lashed out with the tendrils of flickering energy I remembered so vividly. ‘Target destroyed,’ Visiter said, his voice flat with shock. A moment later the raider fired again, and dispatched the other warship with equal ease. ‘Now it’s movin’ towards the rest of the enemy flotilla. I don’t know how it expects to take on the cruiser, though.’

‘It won’t have to,’ I said. The necrons I’d seen teleport away must have gone somewhere, and that vessel was the obvious destination. And if it had a functioning warp portal, then everyone aboard the *Undefeatable* was as good as dead. ‘They’ll teleport boarders across.’

‘They’ll do what?’ Visiter just had time to say, before his image vanished from the hololith, fragmenting in a shower of static. A moment later the display reset itself, reverting to the tactical summary we’d been looking at before the commodore contacted us, the icons of the enemy an ominous increment closer to our position.

‘What happened?’ Julien asked. ‘Are they still there?’

‘The transmission was disrupted,’ Felicia told us, after listening to her internal vox for a moment. ‘By a massive burst of warp energy.’ She smiled thinly in my direction. ‘Not our fault, this time.’

‘Those ships have a warp portal aboard,’ I said. ‘The necrons must have activated it.’

‘The who?’ Felicia asked, sounding bewildered. Makan undoubtedly knew what I was talking about, he was Ordo Xenos after all, but Rorkins and Julien clearly didn’t recognise the name either, which was hardly surprising.

‘They’re xenos,’ I said, cutting the explanation as short as I could. ‘I’ve had a few run-ins with them before, but there are precious few who can say the same and still draw breath. They make the ’nids look almost harmless by comparison, and they’ve been infesting the galaxy for long enough to have been around when the Shadowlight was made. I saw a scouting party of them up on the ridge last night, and I don’t think they’re here for the fishing.’

‘Then how come I’ve never heard of them?’ Rorkins asked, reasonably enough under the circumstances.

‘Because most of the people who’ve encountered them are dead,’ Makan

said. 'They seem to exist purely to kill. There have been rumours about them for centuries, but the first hard evidence only emerged in 897, in the aftermath of an attack on a Sororitas facility.'

Julien's face paled. 'Sanctuary 101,' she said, and Makan nodded. The name meant nothing to me, but the Celestian's expression was now suffused with righteous anger. 'Then let them come, and meet their retribution.'

'You may or may not get the chance for that,' I pointed out, 'but Varan will most definitely be here before dawn.' I was far from casual about dismissing the necron threat, as you can imagine, particularly as I was the only one present with the faintest idea of just how formidable the metal warriors were, but from my point of view there was no point in even trying to make plans to deal with them: how can you defend against an enemy which can teleport at will, into the heart of your defences, and phase casually through the walls when they get there? In my experience, the only chance you had against them was to run and hide, or concentrate your fire against one unit at a time, in the hope of knocking enough of them down to buy the time to move on to the next one and repeat the trick, before half of the damned machine creatures got back up and came at you again. In either case, you just had to wait for them to make the first move. Varan, on the other hand, was a clear and present danger I could do something about, and I intended to do so.

'And you think you know how to see him off?' Felicia asked.

'I've got an idea,' I admitted. 'But I don't think you're going to like it.' Well, I was right about that, something the storm of protest from everyone present as soon as I'd voiced the thought made abundantly clear, but since the warmaster's horde would be on us within half an hour, and no one could think of a better alternative, despite my fervent wish that somebody would, I'd just have to go through with it. Sighing, I walked to the nearest vox-unit, those damned cables catching at the toe of my boot as usual, and peered at the dials. 'Anyone know what frequency the enemy's using?' I asked.

'Here, let me.' Felicia bustled over, no doubt happy to have found some kind of displacement activity, and fiddled with the dials for a moment. 'Try it now.'

A voice floated into the room, sounding surprisingly calm and businesslike, calling for an update on the state of readiness of a unit which, according to the last Perlian PDF roster I'd seen, should have been guarding the Governor's palace, but which was now evidently inbound with the rest

of Varan's bewitched army.

I picked up the microphone, and hesitated, a million doubts rising up to assail me, then fought them down with grim resolution. Feeling as though my tongue was coated in ash, I began to transmit. 'This is Commissar Ciaphas Cain,' I said, 'for Warmaster Varan, requesting a personal meeting to discuss terms of surrender.'

'Here they come, sir,' Jurgen said, standing close at my side, as Varan's personal shuttle circled the roof of the Mechanicus shrine like a raptor preparing to swoop. It looked like the same one I'd seen him disembark from on the lawns of the Governor's palace, and, knowing what I did now, I breathed a silent prayer of thanks to the Emperor for having kept me far enough away to have escaped the insidious influence of the warmaster's voice. Not that I expected His Divine Majesty to be listening, but you never knew, and given how likely it was that I'd be meeting Him in person before too much longer, it probably wouldn't hurt to suck up a bit while I had the chance.

I glanced down from our vertiginous perch, where the first few rays of the rising sun were beginning to lighten the leaden sky, fighting the childish impulse to wave to Rorkins and the others, who were still shrouded in shadow; in furtherance of the masquerade we were engaged in, our people were all standing out on the piazza at parade rest, Grouber's Chimeras drawn up neatly in front of the shuttles. My cadets were strutting about, appearing to chivvy up the slackers, while unobtrusively pinpointing the landing sites of the enemy ships and noting the deployment of the disembarking troops.

Our pantomime of cooperation wasn't just designed to feed Varan's ego, which I'd calculated from the pict recordings I'd seen would be unable to resist the kudos of appearing to best a Hero of the Imperium in person, it rather neatly prevented the enemy from putting down too close to the shrine itself. Of course most Chaotics wouldn't have been too bothered by that, perfectly happy to land on top of the mass of troops, incinerating them with their landing thrusters in the process, and I had felt a few anxious moments as the airborne assault began, but I'd read my man well; true to my deductions about his methods, Varan wasn't about to deny himself another tranche of perfectly good meat puppets to swell his growing army.

'Shuttle eighteen just grounded,' Kayla murmured in my earpiece. 'Two

hundred metres downslope, thirty degrees from marker.’ In the absence of any other clear reference point, everything was being pinpointed by its angle and distance from the obelisk, which was pretty hard to miss. Her voice took on a tinge of revulsion. ‘It’s carrying more mutants, dozens of them.’

‘Acknowledged,’ I voxed back. That was the last of the shuttles, apart from the warmaster’s personal transport, which circled us again, lazily, clearly intent on keeping us waiting to emphasise who was in charge. That was fine by me; let the pox-rotted son of a mutant enjoy his little gloat while he could. The more in control of the situation he thought he was, the more wrong-footed he was going to be when I pulled the rug out. ‘Vox silence until I give the word.’ One of the little black dots far below us nodded its head, and I turned to Jurgen. ‘Are you ready for this?’ I asked.

‘Of course, sir,’ he replied, although I’d never expected a different answer. He’d been ready and willing, in his own somewhat idiosyncratic fashion, since the day I’d met him on Desolatia, all those years before. I’d never known his gift to fail us, even against daemons, so I wasn’t expecting too much trouble from a jumped-up little psyker with comedy facial hair, but you never knew: it was always the unexpected that killed you.

‘Then I think we’re on,’ I said, envying him his calm conviction that everything would work out for the best because I had it all under control. A conviction I wished to the Throne I was able to share. Nevertheless, a lifetime of expertise in the art of conniving and misdirection had been the perfect preparation for this moment, and my demeanour, at least, was calm as the warmaster’s shuttle settled to the surface of the rockcrete roof of the vast structure we stood on. (A structure I tried not to remember could be reduced to a very large pile of rubble in an instant, if Yaitz had done his job properly.) I blinked my eyes clear of the stinging dust the landing thrusters had kicked up, and straightened my cap, trying to look as dignified as the ostensible occasion demanded.

After a moment the engines powered down, and the boarding ramp extended. Shadows moved in the compartment beyond, just as they had in Trevellyan’s garden, and I found myself tensing as the warmaster appeared at the top of it. He’d clearly dressed up for the occasion, his sable cape ornamented with a ridiculous amount of gold braid, the crimson jacket beneath it almost equally encrusted and surmounting trousers of vermillion, piped in silver, the whole ensemble topped off with a wide-brimmed hat

from which a pure white feather protruded at what he no doubt thought of as a jaunty angle.

It was my first sight of his companions which truly startled me, though. As the pair of bodyguards flanking him clanged down the ramp, in perfect lockstep, it was all I could do to restrain a gasp of astonishment. The hulking figures I'd taken for Traitor Marines when I'd seen them at a distance were clad in Sororitas pattern power armour, the *fleur de lys* decorating them crudely defaced with Chaotic runes, the blank visors of their helmets staring in my direction. Remembering my incredulity at Orelus's account of the convent on Madasa falling within the hour, it seemed I owed the rogue trader an apology when next we met. If Varan's power could overcome the faith of even the Emperor's most dedicated warriors, it seemed I was in serious danger of underestimating him.

As the little group reached the bottom of the ramp, Varan held up a hand, and the corrupted sisters both stopped dead, like servitors with their power lines cut. He smiled affably at me, and swept the cape from his shoulders, throwing it back behind himself without looking; one of the guards caught it, her armour servos whining as her arm moved, then froze again into watchful immobility, her bolter gripped easily in her other hand.

I didn't move or speak either. The theatrical gesture reinforced the opinion I'd formed on first seeing the pict files Nelys had confiscated from the Madasan prisoners, and which had led me to formulate this rather desperate strategy; that Varan was inordinately fond of dramatic flourishes, and never tired of hammering home the fact that he was in control. The classic behaviour pattern of someone riven with insecurities, in other words, which given the fickle nature of the boons the Dark Powers granted their followers, and the perpetual backstabbing struggle for dominance among the countless factions which made up the armies of Chaos, was hardly surprising.

'Commissar. We meet at last,' Varan said, and I flinched, half expecting to feel my mind trickling out through my ears, but so far as I could tell I was still my old self, and my nose told me that Jurgen was most definitely his. Certain now that my aide's extraordinary talent was protecting us as I'd hoped, I began to relax. The warmaster waved at a cyberskull, which darted out from somewhere inside the shuttle, and began to circle us. For a moment I tensed again, fearing that he'd seen through our ruse and was anticipating some kind of attack, but as it swooped closer I could see that it

was carrying nothing more deadly than a pictcaster. 'Do you mind if we record these proceedings? I think the citizens of Perlia will find them most illuminating.'

'By all means,' I agreed, as affably as I could. This was a real bonus, although I suppose I should have anticipated it. Someone like Varan wouldn't be able to really enjoy his triumph unless he'd spread it around enough for his sycophants to congratulate him about it, and the propaganda value of broadcasting pictures to the rest of the planet of the legendary Liberator kowtowing to him would have been incalculable. Morale among the loyalists would collapse like a pricked soap bubble. 'I'm sure they've had more than enough of the last pictcast I made.'

'No doubt,' Varan said, apparently nettled at me departing from the script in his head with a sally of my own. Well, he was going to be a lot more upset than that before too long. 'I'm sure your surrender will make far more congenial viewing.'

'My surrender?' I asked, then bellowed with laughter, which sounded genuine enough to turn his face puce with fury. 'I'm afraid there's been a bit of a misunderstanding. I summoned you here to accept *your* surrender.'

'Summoned *me*?' For a moment his outrage and incredulity was so overwhelming that it never even occurred to him to wonder why his power wasn't working. 'Who the hell do you think you are to be giving the orders?'

'My name is Ciaphas Cain,' I said levelly, not above hamming it up a bit for the benefit of the hovering pictcaster either, if I'm honest, 'and I'm a commissar. It's my job.' A flicker of doubt was beginning to show in Varan's eyes now, as it slowly dawned on him that I wasn't under his control. 'Surrender or die, as you please, it's all one to me.'

'Kill him!' Varan screamed, gesturing to his bodyguards, and I tensed as their bolters came up, aiming in my direction. I had only one chance of survival, and I took it, breaking into a run towards the little tableau at the bottom of the shuttle's boarding ramp, Jurgen at my heels as always.

'I'll take that as a no,' I said, drawing my weapons, and hoping we could close the distance in time. Fortunately we could, and the bolters aiming at us began to waver, just as Donal's laspistol had done when he'd come within the influence of Jurgen's talent. 'Stick close to the sisters,' I told my aide.

'Right you are, sir,' he agreed, slipping the strap of his lasgun from his

shoulder. The melta would have been a great deal more useful if the Sororitas renegades turned on us after all, but its presence would have undermined the pretence of surrender, whereas a Guardsman would no more be parted from his lasgun than he would from his own arm; seeing Jurgen without it would have seemed equally incongruous, and perhaps forewarned Varan that he was walking into a trap.

As Jurgen reached them, the two women began to scream, the sound amplified horribly by the vox units built into their helmets, shuddering as though both their suits had suddenly become electrified. Donal had found the psychic shock of being suddenly released from Varan's thrall traumatic enough after being under it for no more than a couple of days, and he was young and flexible in his thinking; the sudden realisation of what had happened to them, and what they'd been doing for the last few months, must have driven the unfortunate sisters instantly insane.

To my astonishment, Varan ran forward to meet my charge, screaming almost as loudly as his victims with frustrated rage, and I reminded myself once again not to underestimate him. Talons appeared at the tips of his fingers, tearing their way out of his velvet gloves, and I let him have a couple of las-bolts square in the chest as we closed. For a moment, as he staggered back, I dared to think that it was all over after all, but he came on again almost at once, a smile of pure malice spreading across his face.

'That was unexpected, wasn't it?' he gloated, leaping at me like an attacking hormagaunt. I pivoted out of the way just in time, his talons ripping the sleeve of my greatcoat, striking at his back with the edge of my chainsword. Instead of biting flesh, as I'd anticipated, the teeth whined, glancing off a surface harder than ceramite, and beneath the ruins of his shirt I glimpsed a layer of scales. Even if he owed his status among Abaddon's horde of the damned to his mind-control tricks rather than the brute strength and ferocity most warmasters of Chaos displayed, he clearly wasn't going to be the pushover his diminutive stature had led me to hope for either.

I just had time to get back on balance before he came at me again, and this time I aimed for his neck, hoping to separate his head from his shoulders, but he'd anticipated that, and blocked with his forearm, which proved to be as formidably armoured as his torso. He struck at me again, and I dodged, just in time, feeling his talons snag for a moment in the carapace armour concealed beneath my greatcoat. If I hadn't had the foresight to don it, he

would almost certainly have disembowelled me with a single stroke. It began to dawn on me that I'd seldom faced so deadly an opponent in single combat, and unless I came up with something soon, he might very well win.

'I can't get a shot, sir!' Jurgen called, sighting down the barrel of his lasgun. 'You're too close!' Not that it would make much difference in any case, I thought, Varan would probably just shrug off Jurgen's las-bolts as easily as he had done the ones from my pistol. The bolters the corrupted Sororitas carried might be enough to do the job, but even if they could be wrested from the grasp of a power-armoured lunatic in the grip of a psychotic episode, they'd be too heavy and unwieldy for my aide to use.

Abruptly, that ceased to be an option in any case. Appearing to regain a vestige of self-awareness at last, the two women stopped ululating, as suddenly and completely as if their vox units had just burned out, and started to run. Before Jurgen or I could react, although Emperor alone knows what either of us could have done to stop them, they'd reached the edge of the roof and launched themselves into the void beyond, toppling over the lip and disappearing. A moment later a faint clatter, like someone dropping a handful of teaspoons, echoed up from the piazza.

As I continued to give ground before Varan's frenzied attacks, evading and parrying frantically, only my duellist's reflexes keeping me from being eviscerated, the germ of an idea began to form. Backing as close as I dared to the vertiginous drop, I let my guard down, for a fraction of a second, as though mistiming a counterstroke, and Varan fell for it. Screaming in triumph, more animal than man, he bounded forward, intent on laying me open to the bone.

At the last instant I pivoted out of the way, letting his momentum carry him past. Suddenly realising the danger he was in, the rabid little mutant tried to throw his weight backwards, arresting his headlong rush, and almost made it; had I not been there, he undoubtedly would have succeeded.

'Commissar Donal sends his regards,' I snarled, and kicked out, taking him squarely in the fundament with an impact which jarred up the length of my leg. Arms flailing, the self-styled invincible warlord pitched over the edge of the roof, screaming in terror all the way down, until the noise abruptly ceased with a loud slap.

I peered out at the surrounding army, hoping against all logic that they'd stand down, released from the madness which gripped them by the demise of their leader, but this wasn't some comforting fairy tale where the spell

gets broken by the death of the evil enchanter. Instead, a howl of rage echoed from the surrounding hills, and they began to charge towards us.

Well, that was pretty much what we'd expected, and we'd laid our plans accordingly. Grouber's Chimeras fired as one, Felicia's modifications continuing to work as though the Ommissiah itself was taking a personal interest, and the front rank of the onrushing horde disintegrated, the survivors scattering to take what cover they could. Our own people scattered too, taking up the defensive positions they'd been briefed to cover, and prepared to meet the enemy.

'Come on, Jurgen,' I said, with a final apprehensive glance at Varan's shuttle, but no one emerged to challenge us,⁸⁷ and we made for the stairs at a rapid trot. 'I think it's time we were somewhere else.'

We emerged from the tranquillity of the shrine into a scene of confusion and butchery, which reminded me all too strongly of the previous desperate battle I'd fought here, so much so that events from the past became intermingled with the deadly realities of the present, and I found myself on the verge of voxing Sautine to move her tanks into position before remembering that she'd died of old age years before.

'Commissar!' Nelys appeared at my shoulder, supporting Stebbins, who was bleeding profusely from a scalp wound, and whose left hand was a mangled ruin. 'They're breaking through in the south-west corner.'

'Then get back there and stop them!' I said. I listened for a moment to the confused vox-chatter, isolated the information I wanted, and cut in. 'Frister, get the arbites cadets over to the south-west, and hold there as long as you can. Nelys is on the way, with whoever he can round up.'

'Yes, sir.' Nelys hurried off, collecting a ragged comet tail of walking wounded who could still heft a lasgun, and I turned back to Stebbins.

'Get those wounds dressed, and report to Commander Rorkins.' Even if he couldn't fight, he could operate a vox or an auspex, freeing up another able body for the fray.

'At once, commissar.' He stumbled away, and despite the urge to follow, I made for the perimeter. We were all fighting for our lives now, and I needed to see for myself how bad things were getting.

The Chimeras were firing continuously, felling the enemy in droves, but it was like punching holes in water; the gaps in their lines would fill again almost at once, creeping forward from one scrap of cover to the next, each

body that fell providing a little more protection for their comrades who survived. One of the APCs erupted in a fireball as I watched, hit by a rocket from a portable launcher, and Grouber's men retaliated at once, saturating the patch of scrub the missile had come from with small arms fire. That threat had been neutralised, but there were plenty more to come; a piercing whistle preceded a series of explosions behind me, close to the shrine itself.

'Someone take those mortars out!' I called, and a moment later Kayla's voice cut into my comm-bead.

'They're dug in behind shuttles nine and twelve, commissar. We've got nothing that can hit them.'

'Frak!' I said feelingly, and switched frequencies. 'Sprie, if you and your friends have finished looking over your new toys, now would be a good time to see if they fly.'

'Already on it, commissar,' the red-haired cadet assured me. 'Our shuttle's prepped and ready, and we'll have two of the ones we captured powered up in ten minutes.'

'Faster would be better,' I said, with considerable restraint. Ten minutes from now the enemy could well have broken through. Yaitz and his skitarii, somewhat diminished in number it seemed to me, jogged past, a couple of servitors with them, and vanished again in the confusion. 'Rorkins, prepare to pull out.'

Felicia wouldn't be any too happy if we blew up the building, but it was beginning to look as though we weren't going to get the choice. The enemy were surging forward now, suppressing our defences with withering amounts of fire, and would be in a position to make a final assault at any minute. In fact, if these had been run-of-the-mill Chaotics instead of using their heads like proper soldiers, they'd probably have started already, which would at least have allowed us to whittle them down a bit as they charged into our guns.

'Acknowledged,' Rorkins said, sounding far from happy, but then he had the tactical display to look at, which would be telling him precisely how badly we were currently frakked, something I wasn't at all sure I wanted to know right now.

'Here they come,' Nelys said in my earpiece, and the firing intensified on our south-west perimeter.

'On our way,' Julien's voice responded, and I became aware of the clatter of armoured heels striking sparks from the ceramic tiles of the mosaic

beneath our feet. I glanced round to see her and her novitiates double-timing it towards the thickest fighting, and she grinned at me, the light of holy fervour in her eyes. 'Coming to join the fun, Cain?'

Cursing inwardly, as there was no way I could refuse so public an appeal, I nodded, with affected nonchalance. 'Ladies first,' I said, waving her through and inflecting it like a joke.

If anything, the situation at the perimeter was even worse than I'd imagined. The enemy had already broken through, judging by the number of corpses in desecrated PDF uniforms scattered about, only to be thrown back by the defenders at some considerable cost; Stebbins had been one of the lucky ones, that was clear, far too many of his charges having failed to make it at all. Nelys and Frister looked up as I approached with Julien and her novitiates, identical expressions of relief on their faces, and the motley collection of arbites cadets, PDF regulars and skitarii with them seemed to perk up too, their sudden surge of unwarranted optimism undiminished by the continuing barrage of mortar fire erupting behind us.

Getting through it to the shuttles wasn't going to be easy, but that was a problem for later; right now we just had to live through the next few minutes, and throw back the next enemy assault decisively enough not to get cut down as soon as we tried to make a run for it.

'Here they come,' Yaitz said, his augmetic eyes giving him a clearer view than the rest of us, and gestured to the gun servitors. They opened up at once, while the rest of us huddled behind the makeshift barricade which had evidently been constructed from the stores displaced to make room for Rorkins's command post.

A second or so later both constructs went silent, all but torn apart by a blizzard of bolter fire, and my heart turned to ice. I raised my head over the parapet as much as I dared, which wasn't much, let me tell you, praying I wouldn't see the sight I expected, and being just as disappointed as I knew I was going to be. A solid wave of corrupted Sororitas was advancing on our position, at least three full squads emerging from the early morning half-light, and I knew we didn't have a hope in hell of stopping them. Come to that, I doubted we'd even be able to slow them down.

'We're reading another flare of warp energy,' Felicia said in my earpiece, sounding puzzled rather than alarmed, and I looked over the barricade again, too terrified to tear my eyes away, despite the obvious risk of taking a bolt to the head.

‘What’s that?’ Yaitz asked, as a trio of vast, tapering structures materialised out of nowhere, right in the middle of the enemy host. The Chaotic advance faltered, no doubt asking the same question, then splintered, as arcs of ravening energy lashed out from the monoliths, blasting the nearest of the parked shuttles to smithereens. The onrushing sisterhood halted their charge, and turned to face the new threat, milling around uncertainly for a moment in a manner they most certainly wouldn’t have done if they’d been in their right minds, then began shooting at something behind them.

‘Something worse,’ I said, activating my comm-bead, and transmitting on all frequencies. ‘Cain to all units. Withdraw to the shuttles now.’ Flashes of green necrotic light were strobing in the distance, sinister metal figures advancing unhurriedly towards us, scything down the power armoured figures which blocked the way.

‘Our orders were to defend the Shadowlight,’ Yaitz said.

‘Against Varan,’ I said. ‘We can’t stand against these creatures. If we try, we’ll die, and they’ll still get their hands on it.’ The Sororitas renegades were breaking, trying to flee, and not getting very far; I pointed to one, caught in the beam of a gauss flayer, screaming as she evaporated like the smoke from a snuffed-out candle. ‘Our only hope is to run for the shuttles, and bury it with the demo charges.’

Everywhere I looked beyond the perimeter, straining my eyes to make out the horrifying details through the gloom, the story was the same, gleaming metal killers striking down the enemy with a casual disdain all the more chilling for being completely without emotion. Most sentient races enter combat with a mixture of fear and exultation, but necrons simply kill because that’s what necrons do. At least they’d taken the mortars out for us, so we could get to the shuttles in one piece.

Yaitz and Julien looked at one another, an unspoken question hanging in the air between them; neither was subject to my authority, and if one elected to stay and make a fight of it, I was sure the other would too.

‘You heard the commissar! Get moving!’ Nelys shouted, and his charges complied eagerly, running for the shuttles as I’d instructed, Frister and the arbites cadets hard on their heels. That broke the mood, I’m happy to say; when Jurgen and I followed, so did Julien and Yaitz, the skitarii and novitiates falling in around us.

My main fear as we lifted was that we’d left it too late, and that the

levitating monoliths would strike us down as they floated inexorably towards the shrine, keeping pace with the walking abominations all about them, but either we were still out of range, or they were simply too fixated on their goal to bother about anyone not standing between them and it.⁸⁸ We circled the valley a couple of times, keeping well away from the monoliths, until the vanguard of the necron army had passed inside the shrine, and I gave the signal.

‘Felicia,’ I said, ‘I’m sorry, but we have to blow it.’

‘I know.’ For a tech-priest she let a surprising amount of emotion leak into her voice. ‘It’s the only logical alternative.’ A long pause ensued.

‘Felicia,’ I said, as tactfully as I could, ‘push the frakking button!’

‘I did,’ she said bleakly. ‘Several times. The signal’s being jammed. We can’t detonate.’

We orbited aimlessly for another few minutes, unable to intervene, but reluctant to depart; then, as I’d half expected, the entire necron army wavered like lifting mist, and vanished completely, the ravaged landscape below where Varan’s invasion force had been obliterated the only trace of their passing.

‘What happened?’ Sprie asked, looking up from his console for a moment, an expression of stunned surprise on his face.

‘They got what they came for,’ I said.



Editorial Note:

The official version of these events is well enough known to need little in the way of elucidation: the following extract sums it up as well as any other.

From *In Blackest Night: The Millennial Wars Appraised*, by Ayjaepi Clothier, 127. M42.

Commissar Cain's duel with Warmaster Varan, a turn of events so melodramatic that it would be hard to credit were it not for the famous pict recording, marked the effective end of the Chaos invasion of Perlia. Demoralised, the army Varan had built around himself disintegrated into internecine warfare as his subordinate commanders strove with one another to assume the overall leadership, succeeding only in depriving themselves of any force worth leading at all; the shattered remnants being easily overwhelmed and obliterated by the PDF, who lost no time in visiting the Emperor's vengeance on the traitors who'd survived. The fortuitous arrival of a naval task force, dispatched in response to a distress call sent out as the invasion commenced, accounted for the enemy vessels still in orbit, which were all destroyed in a single, well-coordinated strike.



TWENTY-FIVE

‘And this is how you found the chamber when you returned?’ Amberley asked. I nodded, while she walked round the dais on which the crystal plinth and the Shadowlight had once stood, narrowing her clear blue eyes as though if she looked at it from a different angle the ancient device might suddenly reappear.

‘We thought it best to seal the room until your arrival,’ I said, as calmly as I could. I’d certainly done my best to carry out the impossible commission Orelus had dumped in my lap, but I was by no means certain that Amberley would see it that way.

‘Very prudent,’ she said, brushing a stray strand of blonde hair away from her forehead. Then, to my relief, the familiar mischievous grin appeared on her face. ‘Although horses and stable doors spring to mind.’

‘At least Varan didn’t get his hands on it,’ I said.

‘No, that’s something,’ Amberley agreed. ‘Although I can’t help wondering why the necrons wanted it too.’ A faint moue of concern drifted across her face. ‘All we can be certain of is that it’s nothing good.’

‘I think they were afraid of it,’ I said. I’d had plenty of time to think about the matter in the weeks following the battle at the shrine, in between hunting down the last of Varan’s converts, formally confirming the surviving cadets as fully-fledged commissars, and evading the Perlman media as much as I could, which wasn’t nearly enough. ‘They’re as old as the xenos who built it; maybe they were allies of theirs, or the *katarn* they were fighting, or maybe they just got caught in the middle. In any case, they were concerned enough to leave some observers in stasis, against the day the ancients might return, or someone else found out how to use their technology.’

‘The chamber in the asteroid you thought might be a necron tomb.’ Amberley nodded thoughtfully. ‘In the absence of a moon, it’s the most likely place for them to observe the planet from.’

‘It was just the miners’ bad luck to break into the chamber,’ I went on, encouraged. ‘The necrons revived, and detected the Shadowlight, but because it was shielded down here they couldn’t pinpoint it. So they called in a ship for backup, and started combing all the sites they knew the ancients used to have an interest in.’ I paused. ‘The asteroid...’

‘I’ve got a Deathwatch kill team going over it now,’ Amberley reassured me. ‘By the time they’ve finished, there won’t be any traces of the necrons left.’

‘I suppose, in a way, they did us a favour,’ I said. ‘They saw off Varan’s army for us, and took out his warships into the bargain.’ I smiled, savouring the irony. ‘Luckily the general populace already thought there was a naval flotilla on the way, so it was easy to convince them an Imperial battlefleet had done the job.’

‘You’ll still have some explaining to do when the real fleet arrives in system,’ Amberley said, looking uncharacteristically surprised when I laughed.

‘It’s not coming,’ I said. ‘It never was.’ I took out my data-slate, and showed her the full text of the message, which I’d picked up from Visiter shortly after he’d returned to the schola. ‘The communiqué’s signed by Fleet Captain Leerie.’

‘So?’ Amberley was never overly fond of guessing games, so I concluded my explanation succinctly.

‘Leerie retired in 954,’ I told her, ‘while I was serving on Zyvan’s staff. Pretty good party, as I recall.’ I restowed the slate. ‘The message was just an echo, bouncing around in the warp. It happens.’

‘But it arrived when you needed it,’ Amberley said. ‘Quite a coincidence.’

I shrugged. ‘I’ve always been lucky,’ I said.

Amberley grinned at me again, her expression appraising.

‘Not always,’ she said. ‘But maybe tonight.’

[On which cheerfully optimistic note, this volume of the Cain archive comes to a natural conclusion.]



FOOTNOTES

1. M41, of course. Most of the material presented in this volume was recorded piecemeal between 002 and 005 M42, with scant regard for strict chronological order even by Cain's usual slapdash standards.

2. Though Jurgen was ostensibly excused shaving on medical grounds, due to his interesting collection of skin diseases, I always suspected the real reason he was allowed to grow a beard was Cain's understandable apprehension about what might be revealed by the application of a razor.

3. Following the repulsion of the ork invasion in 923 M41, and in response to the growing number of tau incursions into Imperial space at about that time, the military presence in the sectors around the Damocles Gulf was greatly increased. Perlia, being both strategically located and in need of considerable reconstruction, became an obvious staging post for these forces, and benefited from the introduction of a number of Imperial institutions, the schola among them.

4. Cain's activities during the later tyrannic wars, though both valuable and fascinating, need not detain us at this juncture.

5. Though relatively rare among the ranks of the Commissariat, there are a surprising number of female commissars: presumably because none of the all-women regiments in the Imperial Guard would take too kindly to being bossed about by a mere man.

6. Imperial Guard slang for raw recruits: apparently a phonetic rendering of FNG, or Frakking New Guys.

7. A mildly disparaging nickname for tech-priests, common among

the Imperial Guard, apparently a reference to the cogwheel symbol of their calling.

8. A truly hideous timepiece, which was supposed to commemorate Cain's victory over the greenskin invaders a couple of generations before. Every hour, on the hour, a clockwork commissar decapitated however many clockwork orks corresponded to the time, their falling heads chiming the hours as they fell into a resonant metal bin. Cain, not surprisingly, loathed it.

9. The crimson sash of the Commissariat, the mark of their authority, would be formally presented to them at their graduation ceremony.

10. Though Cain's origins remain something of a mystery, he makes frequent allusions throughout his memoirs to having been native to a hive world. Which one, however, he never specifies: perhaps he never knew himself.

11. A phenomenon which seems to be related to their peculiar biology: for a short and relatively accessible précis of the current theory of spore dissemination, see The Fungoid Menace: Orkish Physiology And Its Implications by Migo Yuggoth.

12. Splitting a standard ten-man squad into two five-man fireteams is common practice among Imperial Guard regiments experienced in urban combat and counter-insurgency, but far rarer among Planetary Defence Forces.

13. Though their authority and responsibilities in the field are wide-ranging, members of the Commissariat are outside the chain of command. If they weren't, there wouldn't be much point in having them.

14. Following their experiences during the ork invasion, the Perlian PDF paid particular attention to guerrilla and urban combat techniques; something which was to stand them in good stead during the Second Siege.

15. Vox operator, a common Imperial Guard abbreviation.

16. Opinion among the Ordo Xenos is still divided on that point. The prevailing theory is that the astonishing amount of variation in colour and patterning observed in the field in some way identifies the hiveship

or digestion pool which spawned the organism in question, and some considerable effort has gone into attempting to codify them accordingly. Under this system, the genestealers Cain encountered here would appear to have originated in one of the splinter fleets currently infesting the Lambshead Nebula; which would indeed have put them in easy striking distance of Perlia.

17. Situation report. One of the many abbreviations common among the Imperial Guard.

18. Although most recruits to the Adepta Sororitas are, of course, trained in their own convents, it's by no means unusual to have a battle-sister or two attached to a schola progenium, since many of the girls taken in by them are likely to feel a calling to join their ranks. Sister Julien would see to their initial induction, assessing which of the aspirants were best suited to the Ordos Militant, Hospitaller, Famulous, or what have you, and which were better redirected along other paths altogether.

19. The schola was sited on the outskirts of Salubria Parva, a mountain village conveniently close to Havendown, the planetary capital.

20. The bulk of the education provided at a schola progenium is the same whichever branch of Imperial service the student eventually enters; after this was determined in their early teens, the specialised training provided by Cain and his colleagues would begin. Although he's never specific about the matter, the cadets under his tutelage would have been between thirteen and seventeen standard years of age, the younger ones still spending part of their time following a more general academic curriculum.

21. This is, perhaps, a little unfair to Cathcart, who, though plodding and unimaginative, did manage to provide a satisfactory basic education for most of his charges. As so often in his memoirs, Cain's disdain for most of the ecclesiarchs he came into contact with may be colouring his view of their characters and abilities.

22. It seems fairly clear here that by 'arbites' Cain means law enforcers in general rather than the Adeptus Arbites itself. Like many seasoned travellers he often uses the word generically, rather than

attempting to keep track of the bewildering variety of local nomenclature as it varies from planet to planet, although he is usually precise about the distinction when discussing occasions on which actual arbitrators were present.

23. The Perlian name for local law enforcers.

24. Cain's first assignment as a fully-fledged commissar, some eighty years prior to the events he's describing here.

25. I did, and I did. Unfortunately, by the time Inquisitor Kuryakin and his entourage arrived, most of the dust had already settled, but that was hardly his fault.

26. The result of what has since become known as the Kryptmann gambit, although they would have had no way of knowing that at the time.

27. Which they were well within their rights to do; as a member of the Ordo Hereticus, he had no official jurisdiction over the operation anyway.

28. This isn't entirely fair, as Orelus's bridge crew transmitted a warning as soon as the traitor fleet emerged from the warp. They were undeniably slow to respond, however.

29. Actually, starships are a lot tougher than that; although both were now lifeless, and their outer hulls little more than featureless blobs of congealed metal, much of their internal structures remained intact. Both were boarded and inspected by Ordo Hereticus investigation teams after hostilities ceased, although I'm assured nothing of particular interest was found on either.

30. The main PDF airbase defending the capital, apparently named for some hotshot fighter pilot who downed an unfeasible number of ork planes during the First Siege. It was adjacent to the main PDF command centre and barracks, so would be the obvious place for Cain to set down.

31. I suspect he's exaggerating here, as none of the buildings around the aerodrome are high enough to impede the passage of incoming aircraft, for obvious reasons. On the other hand, Sprie was clearly having some difficulty in remaining airborne at all, so I suppose there

might be a grain of truth in it.

32. Many of the atmosphere craft in use by the PDF were simple aerofoil designs, which required runways to take off and land, and even some of the ones capable of lifting or landing vertically would still use them in order to maximise their payloads.

33. No doubt the one he gave Orelus had been taken aboard purely for that purpose.

34. Largely, I suspect, because they all included the word 'Madasa' in large red letters; he would hardly have had time to look it up.

35. Typically, it doesn't seem to have occurred to him that his presence there had greatly increased the morale of the defenders, thus making a substantial contribution to the victory.

36. Which implies that he got the tech-priest he'd requested after all, even though he doesn't bother to mention it.

37. The Bloody Rose, from the description of her vestments, although Cain is never specific about this.

38. The cloud of cometary debris marking the nominal boundary of a stellar system.

39. Like most such institutions, the schola progenium would have been endowed by the Ecclesiarchy, and most of the non-specialist staff drawn from their ranks.

40. Actually, 'alive' is somewhat debatable where the necrons are concerned. 'Animate' would probably be a better description.

41. Because neither we nor the Mechanicus are particularly stupid, and had made very sure that our installation there was well shielded from psychic detection.

42. After Action Reports, passed up the chain of command from the units engaged in combat for later evaluation.

43. Hardly surprising, since relations between the Ecclesiarchy and the acolytes of the Omnissiah are generally somewhat strained at best.

44. Of incense, presumably.

45. An understandable assumption in a man who'd never had much to

do with domestics; although, given how useful they generally are as informants, I've no doubt that his presence was both noted and discussed at length by them.

46. None at all: contrary to popular belief, the Adepta Sororitas doesn't actually require its members to remain celibate, although few find the time to take advantage of the fact.

47. Obviously, given the time constraints, there was no question of being able to issue proper uniforms to the newly-formed militia. Instead they were given armbands, bearing the letters PDV, which stood for Planetary Defence Volunteers.

48. There were women serving in the PDF, but, like the Imperial Guard regiments the organisation was modelled on, most were attached to single-sex formations.

49. Hardly surprising, as we'd gone to considerable trouble to conceal the real reason for the shrine's existence.

50. Clearly an exaggeration, as a plasma bolt passing that closely would have inflicted severe flash burns.

51. Which he'd 'forgotten' to return to stores after our eventful foray into the undercity on Gravalax, some seventy years before; by this time it was somewhat battered, to say the least.

52. Annoyed, most certainly: I do not, nor ever have, become 'snitty.'

53. A somewhat abridged version, anyway. There were certain aspects of our activities on Peririmunda which our Adeptus Mechanicus partners in the project most definitely didn't need to know.

54. And what meaning has been assigned to some of the symbols is conjectural at best.

55. Although, given their fixity of purpose, and apparent lack of free will, why they would bother writing anything down is beyond me.

56. Void station Delta Sigma Novem, if anybody cares.

57. Something most women have been perfectly able to do since the dawn of history in any case, much to the bemusement of men.

58. Somehow, I doubt that.

59. And why not, since life turns out to be depressingly short for so many of them.

60. Unfortunately, in the light of more recent events, this no longer appears to be the case.

61. With very good reason; anyone with sufficiently high clearance may find the details in the restricted archives of the Damocles Conclave, filed as *The Starwind Affair*.

62. In fact Visiter was void born, which might have accounted for his eagerness to get back into space.

63. A naval term for a kitbag; it's not in use among the Imperial Guard, so presumably Cain picked it up from Visiter.

64. 'A trooper is a weapon in the hand of the Emperor, and should keep his edge keen.' One of the so-called Forty Principles of Melkirk, a much venerated commissar of the 37th Millennium, whose writings are still popular among his successors even today.

65. The Commissariat oversees all branches of the Imperial military, with the obvious exceptions of the Astartes and the Adepta Sororitas.

66. By which he presumably means nightfall in *Salubria Parva*, as, of course, the fighting was going on all over the planet.

67. A Perlian rodent, most notable for a number of disgusting personal habits.

68. In fact Perlia was to be treated to an almost continuous display of cosmic fireworks for the next three years, before the majority of the debris was finally consumed. Long before that, however, the largest pieces, and those constituting a danger to navigation, had been either salvaged or blown to bits by the SDF.

69. Perlia had no moon: hence the significance of the orbital peculiarity of the mining asteroid, which I drew attention to earlier.

70. A Valhallan colloquialism, one of the many Cain picked up from his years of association with the natives of that planet. Suffice it to say that the polar regions of an ice world are pretty unpleasant, even by the normal standards of such places, and people only venture north (or south) of their nominal boundaries under the most desperate of

circumstances.

71. Luckily for the defenders of Perlia, the majority of the tanks in the invasion fleet do indeed seem to have been lost, either during the orbital engagement, or in the disorganised landings which followed. Enough appear to have survived to have been a considerable nuisance, however.

72. Relatively speaking. Despite the best efforts of the ground staff, the marks of their passage are still visible if you know where to look.

73. Which must therefore have been the command variant, rather than the scout pattern favoured by Cain.

74. Surprisingly, given his habitual cynicism, Cain neglects the most obvious possibility; that, as well as egress, the passageways were intended to provide discreet access for certain favoured courtesans.

75. Reasonably well, if I've managed to correctly identify the unit in question from the PDF roster and subsequent debriefings: as ever, Cain's propensity to gloss over matters which don't particularly concern him proved to be something of a handicap in this regard. They appear to have successfully raided an enemy supply dump, and ambushed traitor patrols on several occasions, sustaining no more than forty per cent casualties before being absorbed into a platoon again as order was eventually re-established.

76. Rather badly; he'd been killed, along with most of his command, in the defence of Follendyke.

77. Given the lad's probable age, it's unclear here whether Cain is being literal or figurative.

78. Whereas Astartes scouts, in general, find unpowered carapace armour better suited to the role.

79. From which we can infer that there was some source of artificial light in the vicinity which Cain doesn't bother to mention, as these colours would have been virtually indistinguishable in the dark.

80. More Imperial Guard jargon, which, in this instance, stands for Support Automatic Weapon, at least according to Mott, my savant. The military mind is far too fond of TLAs, if you ask me. (Which Cain once

assured me, with a perfectly straight face, was the preferred Guard terminology for Three Letter Abbreviations. I'm still not sure if he was pulling my leg or not.)

81. See my earlier comment about the ambient light levels.

82. Popular accounts of the Second Siege generally devote at least a chapter to this incident, which has spawned a number of popular novels, holodramas, and picts, usually depicting the newly appointed Governor as a cool and decisive heroine. Curiously, the squad of stormtroopers Rorkins dispatched to bodyguard her, and who almost certainly saw off the insurgents without any help from enthusiastic amateurs, barely feature in these narratives.

83. An innocuous-looking merchantman which has been heavily armed, often to the standards of a warship, these vessels are sometimes used as covert escorts for vulnerable convoys, or as bait to lure pirate vessels into an ambush; by the time a marauder discovers that their apparently helpless prey actually outguns them, it's usually too late.

84. Caused by the air rushing in to fill the sudden vacuum.

85. The town of Cainstead, formerly Prosperity Wells, was the site of Cain's first major victory over the ork invaders, and the birthplace of the ad hoc army he was to lead across the continent. The change of name marked the resettlement of the community, the original town having been all but destroyed in the fighting, a gesture Cain found both hilarious and mildly embarrassing.

86. From these recordings, almost certainly a Jackal raider.

87. When the clean-up teams arrived at the shrine, they found the body of the pilot still sitting in the cockpit; it seems Varan had instructed the unfortunate fellow to wait for his return, and he'd simply starved to death at the controls.

88. More probably the former, as, given what little we understand about necron motivation, they seem unlikely to let anyone live if they have the choice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Mitchell is the author of a long-running series of Warhammer 40,000 novels about the Hero of the Imperium, Commissar Ciaphas Cain, as well as the audio drama *Dead In The Water*. He has also written a plethora of short stories, including 'The Last Man' in the *Sabbat Worlds* anthology, along with several novels set in the Warhammer World. He lives and works in Cambridge.

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An extract from *Baneblade*.



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Morning. Battle had begun. The Imperial advance, entirely mechanised, swept across the plains towards the ork siege lines. Around the Leman Russes and the Chimeras, the Baneblades and the Salamanders and the other armoured vehicles of the assault, a storm of shocking ferocity raged, masking their approach, but playing havoc with communications.

‘Sta... ation. Comm... s ... itical. Storm is worsenin...’ Lieutenant Colaron Artem Lo Bannick’s ears rang with Kalidar’s electrostatic roar, the directions keeping the 3rd Company of the 42nd Paragon Tank Regiment’s echelon true garbled beyond comprehension. In conditions like this, even with the Leman Russ battle tanks so close to one another, short-range voxcasters barely worked, while the comm suite’s logic engine had become a lump of inert brass and plastics that did nothing but take up space. Kalidar appreciated no other voice than her own. ‘Sig... a... 317... Keep... ormation. Katal, you... squadron... andering to the left.’ The vox crackled, a stream of gibberish that might once have been an order rushing out.

‘Say again, command, say again!’ Bannick’s finger clicked off the speaking horn. Nothing but screeching came in reply. ‘Damn storm’s getting worse.’ Bannick hunched over the command suite of his Leman Russ *Indomitable Fury* and checked his squadron’s positioning against the overall plan. All bar the simplest instruments showed some kind of effect from the planet’s chaotic magnetosphere, but as far as he could tell they were still in formation. The glass bulbs positioned round the circumference of the Leman Russ’s vision block were sandblasted opaque by the planet’s accursed dust, revealing only an undifferentiated yellowish blur that could have been sky or ground. The tank’s augurs were not much better, screens rippling with actinic ghosts. Thankfully the periscope had been fitted with a cover, or they’d stay blind. He dared not open that yet; he’d learned from veterans of the campaign that supplies could be months in coming. To lose the periscope would be a disaster.

Indomitable Fury bucked and gyred underneath him. Gunner Patinallo glanced up at Bannick from the seat below and to the right of his own, the massive breech block of the battle cannon like a threat between them.

‘Squadron Three! Keep your tanks in line!’ Bannick shouted into the

speaking horn in an effort to make himself heard over the roar of the engine. 'I don't want my name read out over the vox like that idiot Katail! Keep us in formation!' Small augur screens showed him his crew: five men. His driver Kurlick, grim-faced and squinting as he wrestled the tank over the soft sand of Kalidar, as blind to what lay ahead as Bannick; Patinallo and the loader Brevant, viewed from an augur-eye at the front of the tank; Arlesen and Tovan, his sponson gunners, one so stoic as to appear petrified, the other mumbling prayers and repeatedly wiping sweat from his hands.

He'd been angered when his squadron had not been given the duty of going in first at the head of their echelon; that honour had gone to Verlannick. His Leman Russ, *Wilful Destruction*, had been fitted with three heavy bolters in its sponsons and hull mount. These would be firing until they glowed red as the tank hit the enemy, the rest of his squadron on his flanks, covering his charge with their battle cannons. All the glory a man could wish for. He envied Verlannick that, even though the survival of the tank and crew was rated at less than fifteen per cent. It should have been him. The short odds of the point position were no less than he deserved.

He shook himself. Envy was not a virtue worthy of the Paragonian clan nobility.

Bannick blew out his cheeks, sweat trickling into his eyes, stinging it. His face itched with grime and salt. He wiped his face. The external screens cleared a little. The pictures remained grainy and jagged with interference patterns, but at least he could see.

'A lull in the storm, Emperor be praised.' Unconsciously he reached up his hand and pressed at the twin medallions under his shirt, the aquila and the cog, side by side, as worn by all the manufacturing aristocracy of Paragon.

The left screen showed a vast expanse of desert, billows of dust from the tanks in front whirling across it. The view to the front and the right was less clear, plumes of the stuff kicked high by the preceding Leman Russ's treads, one of the two in his squadron besides his own *Indomitable Fury*. The third was practically invisible, further out still, its shape lost in the storm. The whole company laboured on a dune as high as a mountain, all ten battle tanks struggling for purchase as they fishtailed their way up to the summit.

The tanks were in a formation designated as Solon's Axe, a *Tactica Imperium*-standard attack mode with trailing edges and a broad, flat front. The 3rd Company of the 42nd Paragonian Armoured Regiment's job was to

cover the left. Out on their right, hundreds of metres away, ran the 2nd Company, tasked with the protection of that flank. The fire arcs were seriously restricted by the formation but that was not important, they were forming a moving wall, a mobile fortress, protecting and supporting the machines in the middle of the two companies.

In between the Leman Russes lumbered the 7th Paragonian Super-heavy Tank Company, four mechanical monsters of prodigious size and power. Their names leapt into Bannick's mind: the Baneblade *Artemen Ultras*, the Hellhammer *Ostrakhan's Rebirth*, the Shadowsword *Lux Imperator*, and the Baneblade *Mars Triumphant*. These were true fists of the Emperor.

Somewhere behind the tank axe rode thirty squads of the 63rd Paragonian Mechanised and 14th Savlar Light Infantry, crammed into Chimera armoured carriers, waiting to leap out and exploit the gap the tanks were to create. They completed the Beta group.

Formation Alpha was of similar composition and rode a few kilometres away, both formations converging on the weakest spot on the ork siege line. The orks had dug themselves in, fighting running battles under and over the ground for more than two months with the lorelei miners and the troops detailed to support them. This attack was intended to break that siege.

The Leman Russ echelons at the sides of the axes would hit first, the super-heavy tanks – slower and more ponderous than the smaller battle tanks – would then advance and destroy the orks and their fortifications in between the Leman Russ echelons across a front perhaps a kilometre wide. Once the orks' lines of trenches had been penetrated by the tank formations, other elements of the Imperial Guard were to move up and exploit the hole, while heavy bombardment pinned down the flanks of the greenskin horde, preventing reinforcements. Caught between the tanks and mechanised infantry in the rear, the miners and the troops stationed in the mine to their front and a rain of high-explosive fire to either side, the orks would be annihilated.

Bannick desired to serve the Emperor in battle; if he were to die, so be it. But there were a thousand pointless ways to end one's days here on Kalidar before you came within sight of the foe – swift dust, radiation, temperature fluctuations and the ever-present danger of dust lung from the razor-sharp sand of the place. Right now the biggest threat was swift dust – if a tank went into a patch of that it wasn't going to come out again. This sector of the front had been declared free of swift dust by Munitorum Ordinators but

that meant nothing; Kalidar was treacherous, the dust moved quickly.

‘The Emperor protects the bold,’ he muttered. ‘Just don’t let me die in some damned sinkhole. That’s all I ask. If I am to die, let my death count.’

He was jounced out of his thoughts as the engine pitch shifted and the tank heeled to the right and leaned back. His back pressed uncomfortably into the equipment round his chair as *Indomitable Fury* hung at a sixty-degree angle for an impossibly long second and he was forced to grasp at his station to steady himself. Through the scoured glass, the colour of the world outside became lighter as the tank reared up into the sky.

‘We’re going over!’ shouted Kurlick. ‘We’re going over!’

‘Third squadron, stay in line!’ Bannick shouted into the horn.

The tank toppled forwards and hit the down slope. Bannick gripped his seat rails as his helmet rang off the vision-port casing before him. The tank’s engine howled as it picked up speed, hammering down the dune, slewing from side to side like a snake on the sand.

‘Stay together!’ Company Captain Malliant’s voice, fighting over the roar of static and engines. ‘Enemy in ...ight. Time to impact is ...’ His voice died away, Kalidar’s angry scream overwhelming him. ‘...wait for my...’

This was it. Contact, his – their – first engagement. Two years in the warp, three days in the desert, right off the drop-ship. Finally, a chance to prove himself. ‘Squadron, prepare to slow to combat speed,’ ordered Bannick. His blood thundered loud enough to compete with the tank’s engine. ‘Patinallo.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Prepare to open fire with main armament,’ Bannick said, then added, ‘that’s if you can see anything in this mess.’ He debated with himself. ‘I’m opening the hatch. Masks on!’ He fastened his stinking rebreather over his mouth, a heavy, rubbery respiration mask wretched with the reek of his own breath and sweat. Hoses snaking behind the command chair in the turret attached it to the filter system, a bulky machine taking up more than its fair share of the tank’s already cramped interior. Bannick had the others sign off to make sure they had attached their masks before he grasped the lever above his head, twisted, and flung the hatch backwards.

Outside was a maelstrom. Kalidar’s wind, never quiescent, keened ferociously through the fittings of *Indomitable Fury*. Dust stung his face round his breather and goggles. Although *Indomitable Fury* was practically new, built when the regiment was raised, already the sand had begun to strip the tank’s paint. He’d heard of more than one man stepping out to be

blinded before putting his goggles on. Such men were shot. The commissars could not rule out the possibility that they had allowed themselves to be rendered unfit for duty.

As Kurlick struggled to keep *Indomitable Fury* on an even course Bannick steadied himself on the tank's turret rail. Out to his right he could make out the shape of Company Captain Malliant's Vanquisher, protected on the inside of the echelon. Some distance to his left a thicker cloud of dust told him the position of the 4th and 5th Companies' axe formation, more super-heavyweights at its heart – the Atraxian 18th – moving in parallel to them. He could see nothing of the tanks themselves, as massive as they were. He could barely make out the other two tanks in his own squadron, their blocky forms obscured by plumes of sand churned up by ten sets of tracks. His ears throbbed, the vox noise scrabbled at his concentration, the wind competing with that and the thundering engines of half a tank regiment.

There was something else there too, a noise not of Kalidar. He sought after it, lost it, grew frustrated, and tore his headphones off. Sand instantly infiltrated his ears, but without the static-filled comms chatter, he could hear the noise more clearly, a rising-falling, as of surf beating the shore, though the last ocean of Kalidar had dried millennia ago.

He squinted through the veils of sand whipping towards him. The chant grew louder. A dune obscured the view half a kilometre ahead. The formation was quickly up and over, Bannick bracing himself against the turret edge as Kurlick took the ridge at speed. More than one tank commander had been killed by internal injuries sustained while in transit over Kalidar's unforgiving terrain.

The wind shrieked, the chant was momentarily drowned, and then it was back on, low and guttural.

Skirls of sand whispered up and over *Fury's* bulk, veils of dust swept in and over him, and suddenly the visibility cleared enough for Bannick to see the blurry outline of Kalidar's fierce blue sun. The shapes around him resolved themselves into tanks. He peered forwards. About three kilometres out over the saltpan of a long-dead sea was a dark wall, a jagged line hard against the desert: thousands upon thousands of orks, all chanting in one savage voice.

'Throne!' said Bannick. 'They know we're coming. They've come out from their trenches.'

The shapes of crude war machines punctuated the orkish ranks, studding

the horde with jagged islands of metal. There was little standardisation to them, each different in some way to its fellows. As the taskforce drew nearer to the orks the lurid colours of their armour, equipment and clothing grew brighter and brighter.

They were loosely organised into great mobs of towering warriors, each clutching at unwieldy alien weapons. There seemed to be little hierarchy to them; heavy weapons were scattered amid their ranks, clanking walkers waving pincers and saws stomping backwards and forwards.

A howl went up from the greenskins as they caught sight of the tanks. Instantly the maws of their war machines flashed fire, the pop and crackle of cannon reports sounding moments later.

‘Incoming!’ shouted Bannick, hoping that the vox pick-up in his mask had not malfunctioned again. Deafening whistles and screaming thrums filled the air, followed by explosions as shells impacted the dessicated seabed and heaved up columns of earth high in Kalidar’s low gravity. One landed in the centre of the formation, completely hiding Malliant’s command tank behind a fountain of dirt. A Leman Russ further ahead caught a glancing hit from a second shell. A track whipped free, the tank pivoting around its uninjured side and coming to a stop, flank to the enemy. Within moments the turret had rotated to face the orks and returned fire. The following vehicles snaked round it and carried on. Bannick recognised the Leman Russ as Kennerston’s, Senior Sergeant in the first squadron. Already he’d landed two shots in the orks’ ranks. Smoothly done, thought Bannick.

Bannick ducked inside, slammed the hatch and replaced his headphones. Dust poured in after him. The tank’s off-white interior, near pristine days ago, was already chipped and filthy.

‘Sir, are you not to direct my fire?’ asked Patinallo, his voice barely audible in Bannick’s headphones.

Bannick clawed his mask off, gasped as he took in the clearer air of the tank.

‘Too much incoming fire! Storm’s abated, so I’ll risk the periscope,’ he said into the horn. ‘Though there is not a chance you will miss.’

‘Enemy line impact in six minutes.’ Malliant’s voice, strong for a moment in the lull in the storm. ‘Your coming actions honour the dead. Prepare to scour this world free of the Emperor’s foe.’

Patinallo looked to Bannick, his eyes expectant over the rim of his rebreather mask. The face of Brevant bobbed about below him. Bannick

nodded at them. What he'd seen had barely shaken his battle-lust. This was what he had come for, this was what he had spent two years on a barge travelling over a segmentum to do, a chance at redemption. Excitement coursed through his veins, and *Indomitable Fury* surged beneath him. A sixty-tonne monster capable of spitting death over a kilometre, and two more like it, were his to command. He felt invincible, as safe behind the tank's armour as if he were enfolded in the wings of the Emperor.

He threw a lever, pulling back the metal eyelid covering the tank's periscope. He put his face to the rubber seal over the eyepiece. The ork horde swam into view, magnified by the scope, a wall of savage green monsters with teeth like bayonets. They were working themselves into a frenzy, discharging their weapons into the air. Suddenly, a large part of the line bellied back and then forwards, a gathering of strength and hate. Ork leaders, taller by a head than their comrades and sporting trophy poles on their backs, ran among them, shouting and striking at the smaller greenskins. But they could not restrain them; the line broke. The orks were as indisciplined as he'd heard.

Captain Malliant spoke. 'The Empe... ..ows the way. Readjust course, aim for the weakening of the line. Enemy in range. Open fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!'

Muffled reports came through the hull of *Indomitable Fury*, the other Russ's commanders jockeying to see who would be first to kill. Not Bannick. He would select his target with care. His first kill would be a big one, he wanted to make certain of it. He scanned the ork line.

'Gunner Patinallo,' he shouted. 'Load armour-piercing high-density shell.'

'Sir! Armour-piercing high-density shell,' said Patinallo. The Leman Russ was noisy, engine, storm and battle noise conspiring to drown out a commander's orders. All conversation was conducted at a shout over the tank intercom. Repetition was essential. Brevant hauled out a green-tipped shell from the rack and slammed it home.

'Track turret. Thirty-two degrees left.'

'Turret thirty-two degrees left,' repeated the gunner. Beyond him the loader had already produced a second shell, preparing to ram it into the breech as soon as the first had been fired. Servos whined as the turret turned.

'Elevate five degrees.' Bannick had his eye on a hulking wagon crammed with orks. Several of these had rumbled forwards in the wake of the

infantry hammering across the sands towards the tanks, and were beginning to outpace them. The body of the gun within the tank's turret shifted, halting with a clank.

Patinallo consulted his ranging scope. 'That big ork tank, lieutenant?'

'The very one. Fire.'

Patinallo sat back and his loader rotated aside as he depressed the firing lever. The tank shuddered as *Indomitable Fury* replied to the orkish guns. The noise inside was deafening. The barrel recoiled backwards a third of a metre, fiercely enough to kill anyone stood behind it. The breech door flicked open, ejecting the shell casing halfway and filling the compartment with acrid smoke. Brevant reached his thick gloves between the gunner's and commander's seats to haul the empty casing loose, hurling it back to the tank floor.

Bannick remained glued to his periscope. Bright fire erupted along the length of the ork tank as the shell hit home, pride burning in his heart with it. Armour plates lifted as if punched from within by a giant. Ork body parts pinwheeled away. Black debris pattered down on the sand. When the last had rained down, the tank sat billowing a streamer of greasy black smoke into the wind.

'Hit confirmed. Well done, Gunner Patinallo, our first kill of the day.' Their first kill ever. He curbed an urge to shout like the savage xenos outside. 'Armour-piercing round,' he ordered.

Patinallo echoed him. Brevant brought up the second shell, slid it into the barrel and shut the breech while Patinallo and Bannick drew a bead on the selected target. *Indomitable Fury* once more gave its deadly shout. A clanking ork walker shattered into fragments, cutting down the infantry about it with red-hot shrapnel. Then the vox blared with static, and the scene was washed away once again by a renewed blizzard of sand. The ork line had vanished, those reckless few who had broken forwards mere shadows in the storm.

'Damn!' swore Bannick. 'Hi-ex! We'll fire blind into the main body! Thin their numbers!' shouted Bannick. His crew dutifully echoed him.

'Prepa... for ...ct.' Malliant's voice began to break up. The end of his statement was lost to the bark of *Fury's* main gun firing for a third time. When Bannick's ears stopped ringing, there was nothing but interference on the external vox.

'We've lost contact with the captain again! The storm's picking up!

Visibility's back down to thirty metres,' said Bannick. 'Sponson gunners keep your eyes peeled for anti-tank. We'll get no infantry support until the grunts debark. Stay on guard.'

'Enemy line two hundred metres and closing!' called out Kurlick.

The four Leman Russ echelons of the twin Imperial spearheads smashed into the charging vanguard of the ork line within seconds of each other. The xenos ran screaming at the tanks, trying to grab on. Many were pulled over, sent head over heels into the dust, more falling under churning tracks. 'Sponson gunners open fire!' bellowed Bannick. Adrenaline coursed through him as the rapid crackle of multiple bolt ignitions joined the racket in the tank. The other vehicles in the formation followed suit, heavy bolters raking the desert. Orks exploded in fountains of gore. Still they came on.

Kurlick shouted, 'Wait, look! Out there, to the left! Contact! Enemy inbound!'

Bannick swung the periscope round, twisting handles to transform a blur of motion into a picture he could understand; out to their flank a score of orks were emerging from the sandstorm, followed by more, and then more. They flung back trap doors and blankets, pulling themselves out of the desert. Many of them clutched crude rockets on poles and limpet mines the size of turret hatches.

'By the Throne! Ambush! Anti-tank, anti-tank! Left sponson concentrate on the missile launchers. Now, do it now!' shouted Bannick.

Rockets corkscrewed through the air on black smoke-trails. There was a ringing bang on the hull. Bannick winced, but there was no explosion. Others were not so lucky. Three found their mark on *Ozorian Endures Fatefully*, Bannick's number two, directly in front of *Indomitable Fury*. It lifted off the sand as its magazine detonated, turning over and over in the air with unlikely grace. Bannick stared numbly as it began its downward trajectory, sure it would hit them, then *Indomitable Fury* spun to the side in a grind of protesting gears. The wrecked tank slammed into the ground metres from them. Bannick was thrown out of his seat, and thanked the Emperor for Kurlick's skill as they skidded round the twisted wreck.

Bannick regained his scope to see orks pouring towards them, more and more appearing out of the sandstorm and weaving their way into the formation. 'Sergeant Gallient, concentrate fire to the left, protect the flank, don't let them through!'

'Mai... n form... main...' Malliant said over the vox. Screams competed

with frantic orders and roaring static as crews were cooked alive inside their armour.

‘They’re breaking the formation!’ shouted Bannick. This was not how orks were supposed to behave; they were supposed to be indisciplined, chaotic. This was a coordinated attack. What he’d taken for impatience was anything but. As circumscribed as his view of the field was, it was obvious to Bannick that this was not indiscipline.

It was an ambush.

Sponson guns tracked uselessly over the orks’ heads as they came in close and low. Rockets rained down from the sides of the formation. As they drew near the tanks the green xenos flung their limpet mines. They stuck with loud clangs to two more tanks ahead of *Indomitable Fury*. The bombs exploded; one tank came through a wreath of fire, guns blazing, the other did not; another Leman Russ gone.

‘There’s one on the hull! There’s one on the hull’ yelled Kurlick.

The clank of heavy boots ran up the front of *Indomitable Fury*. Bannick reacted fast, threw open the hatch, hand pulling his rebreather over his mouth.

He rose into the teeth of fury itself. His nose clogged and sand rasped in his throat and lungs before the mask snapped into place. An ork, taller than the tallest man Bannick had ever seen and as heavily muscled as Paragonian swamp cattle, towered above him. Its raised hands held high a metal pole so heavy that Bannick could never have lifted it. Atop the pole a fat, chequered rocket had been wired in place like a hammerhead.

Bannick grabbed for the storm bolter atop the pintle mount. His hands found the cold metal grips, gritty with sand, and he swung it round. The world contracted to a point immediately in front of him – ork and gun, life and death. The storm and the battle were wiped from his perception, his sense of time slowed to a crawl. He pulled the trigger of the storm bolter, watching detachedly as the bolts came out of the weapon’s twin barrels, tiny jets igniting at the tail of each as they exited, to accelerate them away. One, two, three... all missed. The ork’s rocket came down, inevitable.

The fourth bolt caught the ork in the leg. Mass-activated sensors detonated the miniature missile’s charge at a predetermined depth within its warty flesh, blowing the limb free in a spray of blood and meat. The ork went down face first, its rocket clattering harmlessly away. The creature bellowed as it tumbled off *Fury*’s hull, its shout cut short as it went under the treads.

Bannick tracked his bolter round, shooting down orks wherever he could.

‘Don’t let the greenskins through into the formation centre!’ he ordered.

‘Sir, something on the scope.’ Patinallo’s panicked voice was loud in his headphones. ‘By the Emperor, sir! Sir, you better come and see this. Sir!’

Through veils of sand like grasping fingers Bannick saw them, ork super-heavy walkers fourteen metres tall, bristling with weapons, crushing orks too slow to move out of the way.

Like all the orks’ machines, they were crude and ugly, fashioned as caricatures of fat ork warriors, bulging bellies made of jagged metal plates hammered together with little care and painted in colour schemes of glaring red and yellow, or in garish camo patterns. Crude, but deadly, and seven of them were coming straight at the left echelon. The formation headed blindly towards them.

‘Formation! Form... alt!’ came Malliant’s crackling voice. ‘Formation...’

The captain’s voice cut out as the ork walkers opened up, heavy ordnance toted on stumpy arms sending shells slamming into the centre of the taskforce.

‘Malliant? Captain Malliant... Come in!’ shouted Bannick. Useless. ‘Lieutenant Verlannick?’ He called out to the second-in-command. No reply there either. That left him in command of the depleted company.

The echelon began to break up as the tank squadrons spun tracks, frantically trying to avoid the walkers. Battle cannons barked flame and smoke as turrets rotated, tracking the threat. Shells shattered with fiery bangs against the thick ork armour, but the walkers did not slow.

‘All squadrons! Lieutenant Bannick! I am in command! Full reverse! Full reverse!’ shouted Bannick. ‘Form up on me! Single line! Bring fire to bear...’ he consulted his tac display, picking out the walker with what seemed the heaviest guns. ‘Point niner-five-zero!’

Hearing his voice, the company began to exhibit some degree of order, forming a wall. They were down to six tanks. Bannick narrowed his eyes. The second company appeared to be doing the same, tanks inching backwards, loosing shots as they went.

He shouted into the horn, internal vox. ‘Patinallo, aim for the...’

He never finished his order. A three-barrelled cannon on a bright yellow walker flashed fire. A second later Bannick’s universe became featureless white, shuddering with noise.

He felt himself fall, then felt nothing.

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